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ABSTRACT

This series of case studies profiles six teachers thought by colleagues, students, and the rural Alaska communities they serve to be good teachers. The case studies reported here describe the techniques that make these teachers responsive and perceptive in their interactions with Alaska Native students. The names of the teachers and the villages have been changed to avoid inadvertently embarrassing the teachers or their students. The studies report that effective rural teachers learn about the context of their community and use this knowledge in their teaching. The local context consists of social, economic, political, historical, and linguistic aspects, all of which influence teaching and learning. Other contextual influences are indirect, such as the knowledge, skills, and values that students bring with them to school. An appendix includes these sections: (1) Identifying Effective Teachers; (2) Instruments; (3) Collecting Our Data; (4) Analyzing the Data; (5) Dispositions; (6) Dispositions toward the Context; (7) Limitations of the Portraits. (ALL)

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THE INVENTIVE MIND:

PORTRAITS OF RURAL ALASKA TEACHERS

G. Williamson McDiarmid
Judith Kleinfeld
William Parrett

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G. Williamson McDiarmid is an assistant professor of education at Michigan State University. He completed this research while a faculty member at the University of Alaska. Judith Kleinfeld is a professor of education at the University of Alaska. William Parrett is an associate professor of education and head of the Department of Education at the University of Alaska.

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Meredith Ottenheimer at the Center for Cross-Cutural Studies prepared this manuscript for publication and patiently worked her way through many drafts and revisions of drafts. We also appreciate the assistance of Pam Toal, Barbara Sundberg, Carol Choy and Dorothy Edy in transcribing lengthy interviews.

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FOREWORD

These portraits were written to provide richly detailed descriptions of rural Alaska teachers for people thinking about becoming village teachers. We have tried to capture the individual personalities of these teachers as well as how they learn about their context and how they use this knowledge in teaching. We hope these portraits will be especially valuable to students in teacher education programs.

Each of the teachers portrayed was selected by three expert groups — rural teachers, rural administrators, and community members — as an "effective" teacher in a specific community. Some readers may disagree with the judgments of these groups. We hope that such disagreements stimulate useful discussion and debate about what it means to be an "effective" teacher in different communities.

The teachers portrayed here come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition to Caucasian teachers, one of the teachers is Black and another is Alaska Native. We regret that the portrait of an Oriental teacher, available in draft form, was not completed in time for publication. We did not begin this project with any intention of preparing portraits of rural teachers from different ethnic groups. On the contrary, we sought only to prepare portraits of teachers judged to be effective by their teaching colleagues, by administrators, and by community members. We do consider it of interest and importance that our three expert groups perceived teachers from diverse backgrounds to be "effective" rural teachers.

In order to preserve confidentiality, the names of these teachers have been changed along with any information that may identify the communities in which they taught.

Judith Kleinfeld
Project Director
Effective Rural Teachers Research Project

"Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality."

William James
Talks to Teachers

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Note: "Austin," "Katherine," "Evan," and "Nora" were written by G. Williamson McDiarmid. Judith Kleinfeld wrote "Matt" and William Parrett wrote "Hannah."

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

How do rural teachers learn about their context and how do they use this knowledge in teaching? To find out, we studied twenty-one rural teachers. In this book we describe in detail the backgrounds, teaching philosophies, and activities of six of these teachers whom village parents, supervisors, and teaching colleagues viewed as especially effective. We appreciate the fact that "effective" is an elusive term, depending for its definition on the criteria of the evaluator. Our intent here is not to defend the selection of these particular teachers as effective. Rather we attempt to show how these teachers develop an understanding of their context and use this contextual understanding in figuring out how to teach village students. (For further information on the selection process as well as a description of our data collection efforts, see the Appendix.)

In every environment, the local context — social, economic, political, historical, linguistic, and so on — influences teaching and learning. Some of these contextual influences are direct as, for example, in the formal actions of the town council, the informal activities of individual parents, and the language children speak. Other contextual influences are indirect as, for instance, in the knowledge, skills, and values students bring with them to school. In some environments, the local context as embodied in students, has particular salience to teaching. Philip Jackson (1986) argues that the amount of knowledge teachers need about students' backgrounds depends primarily on two factors: the subject matter being taught and the extent to which the teacher can presume a shared identity. In rural Alaska, most teachers are non-Natives from either urban Alaska or outside the state. Teachers can, thus, presume little shared identity with their students who are typically Natives born and reared in villages. Consequently, if they are to acquire the knowledge of the local context critical to teaching so that children learn, teachers must set out, actively and consciously, to do so. Given the complexity of the local context, the question is: To what events and phenomena in the local context should teachers attend? While the answer to this question will vary from one setting to another, we found that the teachers we studied did attend to similar things.

A concomitant question is: Where and how do rural teachers find out what they need to know about the local context to enable them to teach so that students learn? As the portraits reveal, the answer to this depends not only on the context itself but on the backgrounds of the teachers. One of the teachers, Nora, is Native and grew up in the village in which she now teaches. She can assume a degree of shared identity with her students that teachers who come from outside the village cannot. At the same time, she, like her non-Native colleagues, actively seeks information on her students' outside-of-school lives.

For each of the teachers, we have identified elements in their context to which they attended as well as where and how they found out about these things. Below, by way of introduction to the teachers, we describe briefly one or two factors in their context to which they attend. The portraits themselves reveal additional contextual factors that the teachers take into account.

Austin

As this portrait reveals, Austin is a student of public behavior. He carefully and non-judgmentally observes his students and others in the village. He learns which behaviors are expected in which situations. The first incident described in the portrait — the hearing-aid episode — demonstrates how this knowledge informs his teaching.

Austin wants to create an opportunity for one of his students, Curtis, to become comfortable wearing his hearing-aid in school. To talk openly about the hearing device violates several norms, one of which is to avoid focusing attention on any individual. Another norm of which Austin is aware is that men do not publicly talk about physical weaknesses.

The knowledge that Curtis will not learn to read until he begins to hear outweighs, for Austin, the risk of alienating Curtis and other students. Austin's knowledge of the norms enables him to minimize the risk involved in creating an opportunity for learning. He allows the topic to come up "naturally" in the course of a discussion of vocabulary words. When the discussion is underway, he takes himself, literally, out of the picture (he leans back in his chair, away from the students who are huddling over the hearing-aid) and allows the students to direct the conversation.

This episode reveals that Austin knows behavioral norms both for the situation and for Curtis. Like the other teachers we studied, Austin knows what constitutes "normal" behavior for individual students — in this case, Curtis — as well as what is generally considered appropriate in the context of the community. He has learned this by observing and interacting, with his students. We see this most clearly in the conference during which Austin breaks the news that Curtis is to be retained. In this episode, Austin watches carefully for nonverbal cues, knowing that Curtis is unlikely to say anything that will reveal how he is receiving the news.

Where and how did Austin learn what he knows about normative behavior? Like the other teachers portrayed in these pages, he intentionally created opportunities or put himself in situations and settings where he would be likely to learn about social norms. For instance, he had his students keep journals — both to help them develop fluency in writing and to tell him what was significant in their lives. Organizing a school band with his Native aide and coaching sports created other opportunities for him to learn from and about his students in non-classroom settings.

As many rural Alaskans continue to view the school as alien territory and teachers from outside the village as a peculiar species, Austin recognized that his identity as a teacher would limit his access to information and experiences. Joining a village basketball team, however, allowed him to interact with teammates as a basketball player rather than as a teacher. As part of the subculture that men's basketball in rural Alaskan villages constitutes, he was privy to information, developed relationships, and observed behaviors he may not have encountered as a teacher.

Katherine

Like Austin, Katherine is a student of adolescent behavior. The mother of five, she brought with her to teaching in Kalkano knowledge of teenage moods and posturing. She then put herself in positions that enabled her to observe and interact with students in a variety of settings — as an advisor to a teen club, as advisor for the Upward Bound program, as a chaperone "on call," and as an adult who welcomed visits from village youth. From these opportunities, she gleaned additional information on youth behavior and attitudes. She learned about her students' capabilities and limits.

For instance, in her individual conferences with students, Katherine knows when to pressure, when to cajole, and when to comfort. Confident that her expectations are appropriate and are supported by the community, she refuses to accept excuses or acknowledge teen insouciance as in her conference with Darrell at the beginning of the portrait. Insistently, she reviews the steps involved in taking notes, sets a realistic deadline — and gets results. She adjusts her tone and approach to each student. While she affectionately bullies Darrell who has done no work on his research paper, Katherine acknowledges Robbie's effort at the same time she guides him toward a more logical organization of his paper.

Like Austin, Katherine sought out opportunities in the community to find out how parents thought of their teenage children — their expectations for behavior and performance both in and out of school and their aspirations for their children. She sewed, cooked, and canned with other adult women in the community. She attended potlatches, rituals, religious ceremonies, weddings, christenings, and funerals. Despite her participation in community events, Katherine never "went Native." That is, she maintained her own style, activities, standards of behavior, values, beliefs, and attitudes. She participated in the life of the community not to efface her own identity and assume a new "village" persona; rather, she used these occasions to learn about her context and to develop relationships with others not as a teacher but as another member of the community.

Evan

Evan, like both Katherine and Austin, pays particular attention to parents' expectations for their children. For both curriculum and instruction, he takes his cues from the community. He recognizes that parents are not anxious for their children to go away to school — either to high school or to college. While his diagnostic-prescriptive program is designed to develop the academic skills that Evan — and the parents — believe are critical to future school success, he is comfortable with the possibility that students may not leave Sailor Point after elementary school.

Evan also pays attention to the community's notion of what schooling is like. Most parents in the village are politically conservative and expect school to look like schools looked when they were pupils. While his relations with his students are close and affectionate, his classroom is a quiet, well-ordered space. Students who do not complete their work in the allotted time are kept in at recess or after school. Students spend most of the school day working individually on tasks intended to give them practice decoding, comprehending, spelling, writing, and computing.

Although a somewhat solitary character, Evan spends time with folks in the village. Friday night pinochle at his place is a regular event. He shows up for the few community events held during the school year, and, during the summer, participates in fishing activities — the economic lifeblood of the village. Like both Austin and Katherine, he pays attention to the behavior of people in the community. From his observations, he learns about the expectations and priorities of the community.

Nora

As noted above, Nora, of all the teachers portrayed here, can assume the greatest degree of shared identity with her students. After all, she was born and grew up in Kalkano where she now teaches. She has raised seven children in the community — and is aunt to many others. She embodies the context.

Yet, like the other teachers we studied, she too is constantly collecting information on the context in which she teaches. In particular, she focuses on her pupils' lives outside of school: What's going on at home? Who has illness in their family, particularly alcoholism? Who has had a death? Whose mother is away in another village or in Fairbanks for a visit or an operation? To find out what is going on with her pupils, she too puts herself in situations where she is likely to hear — at church, bingo games, community events, visits to parents' homes, and so on. For example, as we see in her portrait, she quickly picks up on Eric who is ill. Later, she called Eric's mother — both to let her know that he was ill and also to find out — diplomatically — if anything was going on to upset him.

Nora is also an opportunist who is constantly monitoring her environment for materials and occasions to enhance her children's learning. For instance, a local poster contest offers an opportunity for her pupils to think about the major health problem in rural Alaska: alcoholism. Because this is a delicate subject with some parents, Nora recognizes that a frontal assault on the issue might create political problems. The poster contest provides an ideal occasion to have children talk about this critical issue without threatening some parents.

Because she is related to many of the villagers and has known most of them all her life, Nora has a tremendous edge over teachers from outside the village. Nonetheless, she, like them, monitors her environment for information that might help her understand what is happening in the classroom, for occasions for student learning, and for potential political problems. Like teachers from outside the village, she actively and consciously puts herself in situations where she will learn.

Matt

During his years in rural Alaska, Matt has learned that people in the villages in which he has lived most value knowledge and skills required to function in a demanding physical world — ability to repair equipment and machinery, build a house or sled, run a trapline, and so on. Matt himself has learned the knowledge and skills needed to build and maintain his own home. In teaching science and mathematics, his knowledge of the application of scientific principles and mathematics to deal with the physical world enables him to help students see the value and usefulness of what they are learning.

For instance, Matt knows that most of his students who stay in the village will someday build their own homes — if they haven't already been involved in such projects. Teaching electricity in science is, for him, an opportunity to also teach kids what they need to know to wire their homes. Students' sense of competence and self-esteem as well as their standing in the village depend, in part, on the knowledge and skills they can call on to cope with the physical world.

Matt is also a student of the power relations in the context — specifically, within the school, within the district, and within the community. He pays attention to who wields power and influence because he knows that failure to do so can undermine even the best teaching and learning. Teaching well is not enough: One must know the political lay of the land. Such knowledge can only be gained by, again, closely observing the behavior of others and putting oneself in situations to learn. Although he is not formally involved in politics, Matt spends time in places around the village — the store, the lodge, neighbors' houses — where views and opinions are aired.

Matt is no Talleyrand; indeed, he has been exiled to a small village because he took a stand on academic standards. He recognizes that if one is to stand for such standards, information on potential allies and enemies is critical. Standing for an abstraction is not the point; providing demanding and meaningful learning is.

Hannah

Hannah is also a student of her students and of the context. She knows that her students learn through both the familiar — dog mushing, moose hunting, and snowmachining — and the strange — visiting cities, eating in pizza parlors, and caring for skunks in the classroom. Opportunistic and eclectic in devising her curriculum, Hannah is ever on the lookout for ways of engaging and exciting her students about learning.

She discovers new ideas and opportunities as she explores for herself new areas of knowledge and skill. For instance, her courageous advance into dog mushing introduced her to a sport and to a world that she could draw on in teaching children who were themselves excited by and familiar with the sport. Her mushing also enabled her to relate with people in a role other than that of teacher. As with the other teachers portrayed in these pages, this other "identity" exposed her to situations in which she gained information and insights normally unavailable to teachers.

Conclusion

We do not intend to generalize our findings from a few teachers that we have purposefully sampled to the hundreds of teachers working in rural schools in Alaska. Indeed, the format we have chosen — detailed portraits — is intended to provide sufficient data for the reader to reach his own conclusions about these teachers who have been nominated as effective by parents, administrators, and their peers.

From the brief summaries above, we see that there are commonalities that characterize the teachers we studied. All are students of their context: They are involved in trying to understand the social behaviors of those in their environment. What behavior is expected, generally, in this situation? What behavior is expected, particularly, from this student in this situation? This information is critical to their teaching, critical to knowing how to create opportunities for students to learn. What social circumstances in the classroom are likely to increase learning? What circumstances in the wider context are likely to influence learning in the classroom? Among these teachers, another commonality is the way in which they gain information about the context. All purposefully put themselves in situations where they learn about happenings likely to affect learning. Some participate in local sports, subsistence, or economic activities; some get involved in the daily rhythm of life — cooking, canning, sewing with others; all become known in a role other than teacher.

We have mentioned but a few examples of what these teachers pay attention to in the context and how they learn what they need to know about the context in order to teach well. The portraits themselves offer many others. We leave it up to you, our readers, to find other commonalities among these very diverse teachers.

We repeat: The names of the teachers and their villages have been changed to avoid inadvertently embarrassing either the teachers or the students. We regret being unable to acknowledge them by name publicly. Their patience, industry, inventiveness, and intelligence are the inspiration for this book. Although each of the teachers has read his or her own portrait to check for accuracy, any errors, misinterpretations or omissions are ours.

AUSTIN

The Hearing Aid

"What's the next word?"

Behind the wire-frame glasses, the pale blue eyes are fixed on the mimeographed list of words held with both hands at table-level. Seven other pairs of eyes, all dark, some almost closed during this first period of the school day, stare at the same list.

"Eric, what's the word?" The blue eyes flick up to the face across the desks.

Eric's eyes do not move from his list on the table. Only the elbow bearing the weight of his head stands between Eric and recumbency. Thick straight black hair falls forward over his eyes. Almost imperceptibly, his full lips moved.

"Prosthesis."

"O.K. Good. Prosthesis. Who knows what it means?" The blue eyes rise but the head, covered with short tousled blond hair, remains inclined toward the table. The teacher quickly monitors the eyes across the desks. From the students on either side of him, he senses no interest in answering. He waits. During the past three years, Austin has learned from his students to equate silence not with ignorance but with thoughtfulness.

"I wear a prosthesis."

For the first time since the teacher asked them to get out their vocabulary lists do some of the students look directly at him. Still, no one speaks.

The teacher looks at one of the girls across from him. She is watching his eyes expectantly.

Removing his glasses, the teacher holds them at arms length. "These are a prosthesis." All the students, including Eric whose forearm, like the stem of a dying plant, has lost its battle with gravity, stare at the glasses.

Glancing first at the glasses, then at Austin's face, then back at the glasses, the girl says softly, "Your glasses?"

"Yep. So . . . a prosthesis is some kind of an artificial or mechanical aid that makes up for some kind of a physical deficiency or problem."

Looking around and seeing that several of the students have begun writing, Austin says, "O.K. I'll say that again — slowly."

He repeats the definition, pausing to allow his students' pens to keep pace. He also answers a couple of questions about words used in the definition. Some of the students rely on the notebooks of their neighbors. In whispers, they ask one another questions in their Native tongue — Yup'ik Eskimo — to clarify the definition.

When the ballpoints have stopped scratching, Austin, his long thin fingers resting on the edge of the desk, leans back casually in his chair. "What other types of prostheses are there?"

The students are again slumping in their chairs or resting their heads on their desks. For several seconds, their teacher's question hangs unanswered.

From the adjacent classroom behind a mobile partition, the click of a 35 mm projector is punctuated by the film narrator's baritone: "The Founding Fathers devised an ingenious system of checks and balances. . . ." Relic of a bygone era of school reform, the hockey-rink size school is an open maze of moveable partitions. Seniors dissecting earthworms at one end of the building, can, if they tune in, hear their younger siblings' primary teacher counting — first in Yup'ik, then in English — at the other.

"A crutch?" The girl's voice is muted with uncertainty.

"Right, Hannah. A crutch." Austin's head inclines toward the girl. He grins suddenly and broadly at her. "What others?"

"How about a hearing aid?" The voice is Eric's. His torso prone on the table top, he is studying the pen in his hand as though it, not he, just spoke.

The teacher, sitting erect and attentive, beams at Eric's head. This was more than he had dared hope for.

"Well, Curtis has a hearing aid." Austin senses a sudden quickening of interest in the room. "Can we see it?" He glances toward Curtis.

The boy says nothing, his hair hanging over his eyes, his hands, muscular and unusually large for someone no more than five and a half feet tall, folded before him. Austin waits, wondering if his gambit will work, fearing that he might embarrass and, consequently, alienate the student. Seconds pass. "The function of the judiciary, in contrast to the legislature, is not to make laws but rather to interpret the Constitution . . ." wafts in over the partition.

"Let's take a look at it; maybe we can see how it works." From his desk, Austin takes a diagram that the audiologist had given him when she had brought the hearing aid in the fall. Unfolding the diagram, he spreads it flat with the palm of his hand in the middle of the desks.

The students crane their necks. Eric, reluctantly raising himself to a sitting position, looks on with an expression akin to interest.

Holding the paper flat with one hand, Austin looks up at Curtis and, for the first time since class began, allows his eyes to rest on him.

"Does it look pretty much like this one?"

The boy was also craning to look at the diagram. Almost without thinking, he reaches up to his ear and removes the small, pinkish device — "flesh-colored" if you happened to be Caucasian. Curtis is Yup'ik Eskimo. Extending his arm, he places the aid on the diagram.

"Yeah."

Students are now kneeling in their chairs and leaning on elbows across desks to get a better view. All seven huddle over the diagram, the aid, and around Curtis.

One of the two girls in the class reaches out and touches the device, turning it over with her finger.

"What's this part?" she asks.

"It's the switch — on and off," replies Curtis.

"It has an 'O' on it there — what's that for?"

At this, Curtis picks up the device and moves the switch up and down several times.

"That's the off position." He sets it down again.

Another student now points to a small knob. "But what's this other thing?"

Again, Curtis picks up the device. He turns the small knob. "Well, this is volume. This turns it up or down."

As he turns the knob clockwise the aid emits a high-pitched beep, painfully shrill. Several of the students wince. Curtis then turns the knob counter-clockwise and the sound stops.

"Sometimes it does that."

With new respect, the students stare at the small plastic device.

"Can I hear with it?" Jimmy, one of the other students, holds out his hand.

"Sure." Curtis drops it into his hand.

Jimmy raises it to his ear, tries to fit it, then holds it away, staring at it. "How does it go?"

Curtis takes it from him and, pushing Jimmy's hair away with one hand, loops the aid over his ear with the other.

Jimmy looks around. He smiles and looks at Curtis, then at the teacher.

"I can hear Margaret." The other students strain to pick out the sound of the school secretary typing in the principal's office, an enclosed room around the corner. They watch Jimmy's face.

"Can you hear lots of sounds all at once?" Austin spoke for the first time since initiating the discussion. He is again leaning back in his chair, his fingers interlaced behind his head, his elbows akimbo.

Turning towards the teacher, Jimmy replies, "Yeah, I can hear everything. It's really loud."

"Can I see it?" asks another boy. Jimmy removes the aid and hands it to his neighbor. The boy holds it in his hand, feeling its weight. He flicks the on-off switch a few times. The next student takes it from him. From hand to hand, the aid is passed around the group.

Curtis takes it from the girl next to him, Bonnie, and holds it near her ear. He taps his pen lightly on the desk. Bonnie jerks her ear away from the aid and stares at it.

"Really loud!" She looks at Curtis and smiles. "Does it hurt your ear?"

Curtis hesitates, then shrugs. An admission of pain might be embarrassing and provoke some teasing.

More curious than ever, his classmates ask more questions.

"How long does the battery last?"

"I don't know. I haven't changed it yet."

"How does it sound when you put the headsets on?" Along one partition hang headphones plugged into cassette recorders that sit in individual carrels.

"It's good for that."

"Could you play music on it?"

"I don't know. I can hear Margaret's radio in the office even here." Everyone laughs. A few glance at Austin to see his reaction.

Taking Risks to Change Student Attitudes

Throughout this episode, Austin has kept himself in the background. Delighted with the way the discussion has developed, he is content to sit back and allow the students to go whichever direction they choose.

Talking about the class later, Austin said, "I thought to myself — 'Good, discussion time. I'm not going to do anything — I'm just going to let this go.' Sometimes I feel funny about that. But I have to remember: I can make a good case for the need for fluency. It's a real achievement when you get everybody going in a classroom like that — especially in a small class. The smaller the class, the harder it is sometimes to get any kind of discussion going that people will listen to.

"These kids have known each other all their lives. Sometimes they don't listen to one another closely. What can Curtis say that Eric hasn't heard? What experience has he had that Eric hasn't had? That's how they think about each other."

The reason for the discussion is less important to him than its flow.

Teaching students for whom English is a second language, Austin works constantly on fluency. Fluency means being comfortable and confident in a language. Without fluency, students have difficulty mastering linguistic mechanics.

Of greater importance to Austin is Curtis. A bright, personable, yet quiet boy, he has been consistently behind his classmates all through school. By the time he reached this English class, he was nearly six years behind in his reading achievement scores. Yet, as Austin noted, his writing skills were not nearly so undeveloped. Why the problem with reading? As a child, Curtis suffered from otitis media — a chronic ear problem common among Alaska Natives, particularly those raised in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta where Curtis's village is found. The problem was detected and diagnosed. A hearing aid was prescribed. But Curtis' academic problems persisted. He simply did not wear his aid.

"First, we tried not letting him into the classroom without his aid in the mornings," Austin told me as he described his efforts to get Curtis to wear the aid. "Since I had him for homeroom, that looked like it was going to be the ticket. We found out that he'd put the aid in for first period and then take it out as he walked out of my room. So we knew we were dealing with something that was attitudinal."

"I noticed the way he'd handle the aid when I gave it to him in the mornings. When he came in, first thing, I'd say, 'Oh, here you go Curtis' — very casually. I always say 'good morning' and 'what's happening' and so on when they first come in. The first two minutes of the day can sometimes make or break it because a lot of kids will come dragging in. I try to hit each kid as soon as he comes in. Sometimes I'll even ignore one and stay with another who I'm working with and then go get the other one after a minute or so — to make sure that a visit is made.

"But I noticed that when I handed him his aid in the morning — I kept it in my desk — he would drop it under the table, turn away, go to the bathroom and come back and say he had it in. So you could tell he was very self-conscious about the aid.

"I really didn't know what to do. I didn't want to put him through any kind of a trauma or anything. I talked it over with our Special Education person and an audiologist who came to the site earlier in the year. We decided that the best thing to do was to be real up-front about it."

With Curtis, being up-front about his hearing aid seemed to work. "He really opened up about the aid after we all talked about it in class. That was the turning point for him. He started wearing his aid more and more and there were fewer times of forgetting. The real tip-off was when he came to me one morning and said, 'Something's wrong. Maybe my battery's dead.' We checked it out and it was dead.

"He became a 'carnival slum' earner for bringing his aid two weeks in a row, having it every morning and remembering to put it in."

Earlier, in Austin's classroom, he had pulled a large cardboard box down from an overhead shelf. Inside was a jumble of feather boas, cigar-size pens, turtle-shaped erasers, pencil sharpeners disguised as animals — a veritable cornucopia of the stuff that made the Ben Franklin 5 and 10 Cent Store the consumer mecca of my boyhood. As he showed it to me, Austin said, "You think I'm above this? I'm not. This is what they don't tell you about in education courses — but it works.

"Well, after this event, after he came out of the closet about his hearing aid, he got more involved in oral language work. He was very successful at a part in a play that we did during the year. It was just exciting to watch him come along.

"That's why it was so hard to hold him back."

Taking Risks: Communicating Standards

The time is some four months later and the scene has shifted across the hall from Austin's room — to the art area. Pinned on the blue partitions are chalk and pencil sketches of horses, sled dogs, and the small plywood houses typical of the villages along the coast. Several large work tables are in the middle of the room. Supply cabinets and a display case sit against the partitions. Nothing is locked. Other than the principal's office and the school refrigerator, I never found anything in the school locked.

Austin sits at a work table. Catty-corner from him is Curtis. He is within arms's reach of his teacher. In all the conversations I saw Austin have with students, he was never further than arm's length away.

The conference is a monthly ritual. "We talk about a lot of these 'grade' things," Austin explained later.

Curtis is leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the table edge in front of him. Austin hunches his lank shoulders over the table, his musician's fingers holding open the green tinted pages of a grade book.

"Curtis," Austin's voice is taut, "you should probably expect to be in the ninth grade a couple of years." He stops, leans back, crosses his ankles under the table. He glances at Curtis whose eyes remain fixed on the table as though holding it stationary by force of will.

Austin clears his throat. This is difficult. Here's a student who has done everything asked of him — and more. And yet, he's holding him back.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do," Austin continues, more relaxed, "and it's mostly due to the fact that you haven't been hearing well in the classroom. You'll be taking ninth grade English in the ninth and tenth grade room — it's going to be all together — the same students. The only new student will be Usa, who's coming up from eighth."

Curtis nods.

"How do you feel about the progress you've made this year?"

Curtis shrugs — a gesture that could mean "I don't know" or, alternatively, "I don't want to talk about it."

Austin backs off, pauses, thinks, and tries a new tack. "What classes do you think you're doing well in this year?"

"P.E." Pause. "Reading." Pause. "O.K. in Science." Pause. "Don't like Health."

Curtis is now rocking back in his chair but keeping the table pinned down with his eyes. Austin is watching him closely. What Curtis says now with his body could be an important clue to how he is reacting to the news he just received.

"What are your favorite things in school?"

Austin is searching for anything to get Curtis to talk, to perhaps verbalize what's going on with him now.

"P.E. and lunch."

"Are you getting a lot of chores at home?" This question has grown out of Austin's experience in the village. Older children often have substantial family responsibilities — hauling water from the well, gathering and cutting driftwood for woodstoves, filling and transporting drums of fuel oil, helping with subsistence activities, caring for younger siblings, washing clothes, hauling garbage and so on. Students sometimes feel these responsibilities as "pressure" that affects their outlook and their performance.

"No. It's easy. I don't have to do anything. My brother does it. He's getting older."

"How's your brother doing in school? Are you helping him with his math?" Austin later explained to me that he has a standard repertoire of questions that he runs through during these conferences. In this case, the question about Curtis's brother has special significance: He, too, is deaf.

They discuss the brother for a bit and then Austin asks the kicker that he includes at the end of all such conferences.

"Have you thought about any plans for college?"

"Yeah, I think about it."

"Good, because I really want you to think college now. There's nobody who's worked harder this year, who more deserves to be promoted. But I really think that when you graduate, you've got a good chance to go to college. I want you to start thinking 'college.' You've been thinking 'graduate' as your goal but I think you ought to start thinking about college success and picking a career and think about being a lawyer or a doctor. . . ."

Watching the boy's face, Austin relaxes. Leaning back in his chair, he says, "Gee, I've been kinda sad — my sister's baby is almost 5 months old and I haven't seen him yet."

Curtis's eyes release the table top and the beginnings of a smile creep across his face as he looks at Austin.

"Wanna see a picture of a fat Kass'aqs [white] baby?"

Curtis's smile widens. "Yeah."

Later Austin told me, "Usually, if the conference goes longer than about five minutes, the little beads of sweat start to form on the nose and I know it's time to knock off because they're starting to get nervous. I always try to give some kind of a personal detail about myself. I'm assuming they are interested in that because they seem to be very interested in personal details about their teachers. I try to be 'up-front' about what's going on with me."

Being Up-Front

Being "up-front" seems to be a key to Austin's teaching. This means talking openly with students about his personal life, his hopes for them, and his failings. In some school contexts, this would not be possible.

In this Yup'ik Eskimo village of fewer than 250 souls, relations between students and teachers differ fundamentally from those in more urban settings. In school, classes are very small — Austin had an average of six students in his four classes — and students may be with the same teacher for several years running. Teachers serve as coaches, advisors, and chaperones who frequently travel with students for sports and other activities. Moving about the village, teachers and students see one another — at the store, the post office, the showers, the laundromat, and so on. If they wish, teachers and students can get to know one another and develop a degree of familiarity and trust that would be difficult to achieve in other settings. This is the context in which Austin talks about his feelings.

"When I do share my feelings I try to do it outside my normal style or structure. I remember once getting really impatient with a girl in gym class. She started crying.

"She went into the bathroom. I stopped what we were doing. We all went over and sat on the floor in the corner of the gym. I said, 'Heh, you know what the goal of a teacher is? Do you know what teachers really wanna do?' — this is a speech I've been through before and in P.E. class it's easy to work on some of these things — 'Teachers want to make people be even better persons than they are. To have a richer life and to appreciate things better and to be an even better person than I am.

"'One of the ways that I can do this is by telling you what I do wrong, even though I don't like to talk about what I do wrong.

"'I feel really bad about what happened with Gloria.' And then Carlson pops up and says, 'You shouldn't feel bad because Gloria is like that.' And another student said, 'Don't worry about it. She does it all the time.' And someone else added, 'Yeah, she just did it about ten minutes ago.'

"I said, 'Well, no, because I did something there that was wrong and I'm interested in making sure that you know that because I want you to not be like me sometimes, because I'm working on these problems in myself. I'm trying.'"

Growth as the Goal of Teaching

"I believe in watching yourself. If you have problems, maybe you should think about going right to work on them. Personality transformation is not that difficult. Getting rid of habits that you don't like in yourself, discovering more about yourself. To me, that's part of growth, discovery about the self, learning to deal with it."

Self-discovery and self-improvement are goals Austin holds not only for himself but that he hopes to instill in his students as well.

"I want my students to enjoy learning, to appreciate ideas, and to take satisfaction in their own growth. Simply, to grow. And, if you like, you can put next to that 'reading' growth, 'writing' growth, 'subject matter' growth, 'maturity' growth, 'intellectual' growth — all the areas in which they can grow, specific subject areas or whatever. Those are my goals right through all my courses — Reading 9/10, Reading 11/12, and both English classes."

At this point in our discussion, he pushes the wire frame glasses up the bridge of his long, thin nose and leans back. "Let me brainstorm off of that." He pauses, thinking, and compresses his lips. "I would add as a goal an appreciation of otherness. By that, I mean an appreciation of other people being different from you, of other ways of thinking and doing things, of ideas and values different from your own and those of the people around you.

"Sometimes there is a preoccupation with being the same. This gets in the way of an appreciation that similarities — in lifestyle, in values, in ideas, in perspective — are not the only basis for friendship or relationships between people — or relationships between yourself and God if that's your bent. So I would add an appreciation that differences can also be a source of friendship or relationship."

I ask him about setting objectives in his classes.

"I don't have objectives for Reading 9/10. I have objectives for Howie

— for who he is, where he is, and where he's going. I have objectives for Mary Ann but not for English 9.

"I have a curriculum guide that I helped write that tells me what should be covered in English 9. To me, those things will be covered when you're moving toward the larger stuff — the growth I spoke of earlier.

"This is a slight heresy, probably. But I think there is a Way in the classroom — a Way of being, living, interaction or something. I don't know exactly what it is and it's very hard for me to pull apart into discreet units. But there is a Way in the classroom that makes students comfortable and encouraged to do their own intellectual and personal exploring.

"If I were to open up my curriculum guide now, I'd see some of the objectives that I wrote down for literature — 'The student will be able to read a parable, an allegory, and a fable and distinguish the three types.' There might be an 'O' next to it meaning it's an optional objectives or no 'O' meaning it's pretty important in the eyes of the people who put the curriculum together.

"Now that wouldn't mean nearly as much to me as saying to my students, 'I'm going to share a couple of fables that I like and I'm going to give you time to look at them. I'm going to give you an opportunity to write one of your own.'

"What happens through this kind of a process is real growth. Sure, after you get done with it, the student's going to be able to say, 'This is a fable and this is an allegory and this is a parable' — but what is that? That merely constitutes little pegs that you can hang the larger learning on. And they are necessary because you can forget things. No one is a ready reference like a computer that can pull up the next numbered item.

"So you need all those lists of objectives to make sure that you don't miss a few forms when you're trying to expose students to different literary types. The checklists make sure you touch on everything that needs to be covered. And yet, oddly enough, when it comes time to test, we check only on those items. We check to make sure we touched all the pegs whose only function is to hang the larger learning and growth on. We don't give students the chance to show their larger learning, the intellectual and personal explorations they have made. That should be our real objective — not whether or not they can reproduce the pegs."

He looks at the floor and shakes his head. "Bizarre."

Transcendental Pragmatism

Austin embodies two of the major intellectual traditions of his native New England.

On the one hand, his notion of a "Way" in the classroom, his faith in "holistic" evaluation, and his constant striving for self-improvement share with the transcendental tradition a suspicion of rationality and analysis. When talking about his students' progress, he talks of "growth" rather than objectives and of "awakening" rather than achievement. He has his students read from Krishnamurti. About his manner there is something of the East in his silences, in the discipline and denial that are part of his life.

On the other hand, his use of diagnostic instruments and detailed analysis bespeak an abiding faith in rationality of the kind associated with pragmatism. When he discusses his students he reveals a pragmatic understanding of their behaviors and motivations. Here is no starry eyed idealist who believes children are guileless innocents.

Austin's pragmatism surfaced when I asked him about extracurricular events that interrupt his classes — the bane of more than one teacher in rural Alaska. Picking up his attendance book, he did some quick calculations, and announced, "I lose 36 class periods per year from each course due to basketball, volleyball, wrestling, religious rallies, and medical-health treatment — like dental flossing, fluoride treatments, medical exams, the nurse is in town and so forth. It comes to about a period a week of lost time. But be careful — that's an average. The morning classes don't get hit nearly as hard as the afternoon classes. And those are my Reading classes. Reading of all things!"

While Austin is skeptical about the use of standardized achievement tests in rural Alaska, when I asked him about his approach to diagnosing student learning problems, he replied, "I use the Stanford Achievement Test and perform the machinations required in the test manual which include creating a graphic profile of each student. What shows up when we analyze our results is that we have a serious problem with experiential deprivation — which is a term to describe just not being exposed to very much of what's happening around the world.

"That runs right through just about everything. The things it doesn't affect are math skills and language mechanics. But in every other area, it depresses scores. There's a distinct reading profile that results from such experiential deprivation and our school is a classic example. That kind of information is relevant to the kind of materials you choose to present the students.

"I know there are a couple of philosophies about what to do. One holds that material should be relevant to students' daily activities and life — totally student-centered. I agree with that in some respects. But I also think that part of what happens in education is hearing and learning about and seeing things totally unknown, totally outside your experience, your community, expanding your experience of the world and of others. That's where the results from tests like the Stanford are useful — in providing guidance on how to deal with skill problems that have their roots in the students' limited experience with the world beyond their immediate environment."

In diagnosing student skill deficiencies, the other, more transcendental side of Austin appears as well: "But my primary diagnostic tool is a writing sample. Somewhere around the end of the first or second week of school, I ask my students for a writing sample. I use this to get a rough sense of grade level based on pure gut reaction. I also analyze the sample for what is there, what is there erroneously, and what is not there. Besides the gut feeling for where the student is, I use a formal checklist of my own devising. I developed this during my first year here when I did a holistic scoring exercise with the entire school.

"So that gives me a pretty good handle on exactly what things I would like to see the students picking up and where I'd like to see them go in their writing. For reading, I use the criterion reference tests that come with the Scott-Foresman Reading Tactics Series. And I rely on my ear for general language proficiency. I listen for sentence length, phonetic reproduction, and fluency. I don't formalize any of that. I use my overall impression of what the student can do orally to place them in a language lab program that I'm very excited about."

A Reading Lesson

"I just got this letter today from Senator Stevens. It's in response to our letter on the proposed automatic ten-percent federal withholding from savings accounts."

Austin reads the letter aloud as he sits at one of the eight student desks which are drawn together in two facing rows. Around him, quiet and seemingly attentive, sit the seven students in his tenth grade English class.

The classroom itself is narrow and small. The partition dividing this room from the next is a green chalkboard. On the righthand side of the board are two columns: "CLASS" and "HOMEWORK." Under the first are written, "9th English . . . 10th English . . . Music I . . . Music II . . . Reading 9/10 . . . Reading 11/12." Under the second heading all but one of the classes listed has "NONE" written beside it. Next to "9th English" is written: "Curtis - no homework . . . Bonnie - finish rough draft of book summary . . . Sally - p. 146 . . . Jimmy - read to p. 102."

A large desk, heaped with papers, books, sheet music, notebooks, a typewriter and other flotsam and jetsam of classrooms, sits across the end of the room opposite the entry. This is Austin's desk that he tends rather than uses. Behind the desk are two bookcases, one containing anthologies of literature, dictionaries, and grammar books, the other, multiple copies of various paperback novels: *The Laughing Boy, The Red Pony, The Quay, The Pushcart War, The Blue Dolphin* and several dozen other titles.

Between the two bookcases is a four-drawer, gun-metal gray filing cabinet above which hang three acoustic guitars from the open steel roof rafters. Beside the bookcase are shelves holding equipment and supplies — paper, pencils, cassette tapes, tape recorders, headphones, notebooks, and the odd textbook. Along the partition opposite the chalkboard are four student carrels. Each contains a small cassette player. A set of headphones hangs from a peg inside each carrel. Taped to the partition above the carrels is a long, white chart on the left-hand side of which are listed student names; above the rows at the top are numbered units. To the right of this by the entrance is a large clock and a schedule of the day.

On the other side of the entry is an open cabinet with numerous small shelves. On each shelf is a rectangular Rubbermaid dishpan bearing the name of a student: "Curtis" "Eric" "Bonnie" . . . . This is where the students store their books, supplies, Walkmen, and so on. On the partition behind the cabinet is a poster showing the sun bursting through heavy clouds. In script at the bottom is printed, "Things of quality have no fear of time."

"'. . . This has been offered as an amendment.'" Austin stops reading and glances at the faces around him. "Do you remember what an amendment is?"

A good ten seconds pass before a student, his head resting on his desk, responds: "It's a piece of paper."

"Yeah," Austin nods his head, "it's a special piece of paper to change the law. What are the first ten amendments to the constitution called?"

The same boy answers again, "The Bill of Rights."

Austin beams at the student, "Very good, Eric."

Austin finishes reading the letter, passes it to the student beside him, and says, "Two of our students will have seen the debate in the Senate that Stevens is talking about. Who are they?"

Several students mention the names of the two Seniors who have been in Washington, D.C., attending the Close-Up program. The discussion then shifts to the performance of the reporter on the state-wide television news program who reports on legislative affairs in Juneau. A couple of students crack jokes about the reporter's ineptitude and everyone laughs.

Austin lays his hands flat on the table, pulls back his gaunt shoulders, and looks at the faces around him over the top of his glasses. "We should get started on what we have to do today," he says matter-of-factly.

(The exchange described above takes eight minutes. In that time, Austin has managed to get his students' attention, reinforce their sense of efficacy, give them practice in listening skills, apply a concept they have been learning in their U.S. History course, and even do a bit of vocabulary work. Were students off-task for these eight minutes? Is task to be defined narrowly by the objectives of the immediate lesson? Or should the notion of task be broad enough to include Austin's idea of personal as well as academic growth?) "First, I'd like to get your homework assignments." All but one of the students hand Austin a sheet of notebook paper. "Where's yours, Bonnie?"

A small girl in a blue tee-shirt and glasses looks shyly at her hands. "I don't have it."

"Why not?"

"Had to go to Kwig."

From this Austin understands that Bonnie's parents had travelled to a nearby village for a religious gathering and had taken her along.

Austin sits back, intertwines his fingers on the desk, and looks around at the other students as he asks, "Let's take a vote — should we accept Bonnie's excuse or not?"

Several of the students laugh quietly, and somewhat uncomfortably — perhaps uncomfortable for Bonnie who is the focus of attention. "Yeah," comes the response from several.

Austin passes out copies of *Scholastic Scope* and begins to talk about the story — Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* — which is condensed in this issue. ". . . takes place on or around the sea, the ocean. Now, you can tell me a lot more about the ocean than I can tell you." The village sits on a bay in the Bering Sea.

"Let's look at the picture on the front. What can you tell about the story from the picture?"

"It's about the ocean. . . ."

"There's a boat. . . ."

"A boy. . . ."

Austin interjects, "Remember the questions we always ask about the setting . . .?" Silence. All heads are bent over the picture. "So . . . what are the two questions." Three students answer in chorus. "Where and when."

"That's right."

"It's foggy."

"The waves are real high."

"Maybe it's a storm."

"Why has the author used a foggy, stormy setting? What do you think he's trying to make the reader feel?"

"Scared."

"Mysterious."

"Seasick."

Everyone laughs.

Austin waits for other comments. No one, least of all Austin, seems uncomfortable with the ensuing fifteen seconds of silence. Austin later admitted that he had to teach himself to wait and to be comfortable with silence.

After the pause, he continues, "O.K., now we're going to do 'shout reading.' You've got to get louder and louder. . . . Who's going to read first?" Austin looks around, searching for a pair of eyes — all of which remain steadfastly glued to the text.

"How about you, Carl?"

Without looking up, a thin boy, his black hair a shaggy mane on his slender neck, pulls the magazine to his chest and begins to read. His words return directly to the page whence they came and bounce weakly towards his audience.

After the first sentence, Austin throws up his hands dramatically. "Nah!"

The reader continues in a slightly louder voice. I can't hear him from where I sit ten feet away.

Austin looks up and around the desks. "Who can read louder than Carl?"

"Me," answers Eric.

He begins to read where the previous student left off. His voice is considerably louder than the first but still relatively soft. All of the students are following the text closely, hunched over their magazines.

Austin stops Eric after he reads a description of the storm. "Have you guys ever seen lightning?"

"We saw it over the ocean," one of the male students answers.

Another adds, "At night sometimes there is lightning — like this." With his hand flattened, he cuts a jagged descending line in the air.

"Where it's really flat, they say the lightning will go where it's high but," Austin pauses and spreads his arms out, "out here, it's all flat."

He continues, "It takes 10,000 volts to make a spark jump one inch — so think how much it takes to make a bolt of lightning."

One of the student looks up toward the window, beyond which lies the roofs of the village, dark and indistinct in the fog, and asks, "What about those wires out there?" Within the past two months, the village has been, for the first time, strung with both electrical and telephone lines.

Austin looks out the window. "Yeah, those are dangerous — need to keep an eye on the little guys." This theme is heard often in the school where all grades from first through twelfth are together.

Another student asks apprehensively, "Do they fall?"

"Sometimes," replies Austin, "if the wind's too high. Well, let's get back to this guy in the story."

The purpose of the students' questions seemed less to keep Austin off the lesson than to satisfy genuine curiosity.

"Who's going to be our next shouter? Let's make it John — he likes to shout."

John reads a paragraph smoothly in an audible voice.

"That's good reading," Austin interjects, looking at John.

A female student reads next and Austin interrupts to ask, "Who is Ebenezar?" A student identifies the character and his relationship to others in the story and then asks, "What's the longest name in the world?"

"I don't know," replies Austin. "Maybe it's Nebuchadnezzar. . . . Should we have a longest name contest?"

No response.

"O.K. I'll put 100 points on the quiz average for the person who brings in the longest name. . . . Now, whose our next shout reader? . . . Carl?"

Austin interrupts Carl's reading to ask, "Who's this guy who's talking now?" After a student answers, Austin says, "Now it's my turn."

A smooth tenor, he reads the passage with dramatic pauses — as befits the theater major he was at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Afterwards, he continues the group reading, making sure that everyone reads roughly the same amount of text. Occasionally, Austin interjects a question, "Who's this? . . . Why do you think he said that? . . . Where is he now? . . . Why do you think he did that?"

At one point, as Eric is reading, Austin stops him and asks another student, "What did you say, John?"

"Too soft."

"O.K. Eric, you heard this picky guy. He says you're reading too softly."

He resumes reading at a notch or two higher volume. When Eric finishes, Austin turns to the critic and asks, "Was that O.K.?" John smiles.

Throughout the readings, the students have kept their eyes on the text and appear to be genuinely involved. Most are leaning over the desks. Although one is leaning back in his chair and appears to be spacing out, when Austin calls on him, he picks up right where the previous reader left off.

After one particularly monotonic reading, Austin says, "Good story tellers change their voice to show who's talking." He then reads the paragraph over again to demonstrate. Then he sits back, folds his arms across his chest, and lets the reading proceed with occasional questions injected into the flow: "What's a 'miser'? . . . What's 'pitch dark'?"

"Let's stop. Put a pencil mark there."

Two students get up.

"Where are you going?"

"Lunch."

"You've still got four minutes. Sit back down."

They sit down. "Thank you."

Austin then asks individual students about books they are supposed to be reading for a book report ("Did you lose it or you just don't want to read it?").

"I'm having trouble finding books for you guys because you've read everything," he says having found out where each student is in the process of producing their reports.

"How many of you will go to Kipnuk?" A religious rally is being held in a nearby village during the upcoming weekend. Several students respond.

"How many of you got to work with Mr. Jones?" Mr. Jones is the itinerant music teacher for the district. He had spent the previous week in the village.

"He don't know nothing about guitars," complains one student.

Austin smiles and says, "You sound like Huck Finn — 'He don't know nothing. . . .'"

A student stops at the entry, leans in and says, "Lunch is ready." Had he shouted "FIRE," the room would not have emptied faster.

Adapting to the Village

The school district in which Austin teaches does not, as do some others in Alaska, provide housing for all the staff. Austin and his wife, Linda, who teaches art at the school, live in a plywood frame house smaller than Austin's classroom. The 250 square feet of space are divided by a sheet. A refrigerator, table, dishpan, and cat box are on one side; a mattress, chair, small desk and bookshelves are on the other. Another curtain screens the "honey bucket" — a five-gallon white plastic bucket which serves as a toilet.

Austin is sitting on the edge of the mattress, picking distractedly at a guitar. His finely shaped head is bent over, his long legs tucked under him, his thin whippet-like frame is hunched. When the heat generated by the oil heater grows too fierce, he gets up to open the plywood door a crack. Beyond the open door, the wind is picking snow up from the ground and hurling it against the thin walls of the house.

Overhead, a single naked light bulb casts our silhouettes on the bare floor. The smell of No. 2 diesel oil burning is pervasive. Beyond the two small windows, covered inside and out with Visqueen plastic, the dark walls of night are breached here and there by the glow from a nearby house.

Between chords, Austin talks of his hitch in the Navy as a clerk, the several years he spent working in a book store in Amherst — that most collegiate of small Massachusetts towns — his years of studying theater, his growing interest in linguistics, and the consequence of Western education on non-literate peoples. His wit, love of words, and broad intellectual background are, like his wire-frame glasses, very much of Amherst. In the classroom, the somewhat prep-ish facade gives way to a more demanding, more practical attitude.

When I asked him about how he adapted his teaching to a Yup'ik Eskimo village of 250, Austin's pragmaticism came to the fore.

"You have to be aware of learning styles and the cultural and psychological factors at work. You're going to be much more effective being aware of those things. But this doesn't mean you have to totally transform your teaching and go into something different.

"I actually prefer to teach from a podium," he laughs and hits some strident chords on the guitar. "But I haven't done any of that since my first couple of days here. In fact, I haven't done it since I read Professor Kleinfeld's paper on effective teachers of Indian and Eskimo students. She was writing about a slightly different population — but not all that different. Educationally, it may not matter too much whether you go away to a school in a city or to a school at the other end of the village run by Kass'aqs. Walking into the school building is so different from every other facet of their lives."

"But what she had to say still holds. Teachers who use 'cultural difference' as an excuse for diluting standards or content are not doing their jobs.

"What do I do to adapt my teaching? Well, I don't hesitate to touch students. I don't hesitate to get loose or to be friendly with them or to show them that I like them. I don't hesitate to show my emotions around them — and I do it in a much more overt way than I used to when I stayed at the front of the classroom.

"My humor has changed quite a bit. My own brand tends to be sarcastic and dry. That doesn't seem to go very far here. I try to get into the more visual kinds of humor in the classroom."

For this, Austin's theatrical training stands him in good stead. Endowed with mobile, expressive features, a stand-up comic's sense of timing, and exceptional ability as a mimic, he can wow them in class. Rather then get angry, Austin often gets funny. This seems to fit with the Eskimo custom of teasing rather than accusing or confronting.

"When I first started teaching here, I had the largest classroom in the school. Now I have just about the smallest. I found that the students are more comfortable in a smaller space because it's more like their homes.

They like coming into a small space and being crowded together. Even in my classroom, they like to go sit by the window and all of them get crushed into a space about sixteen feet square. There are a lot of little adaptations like that that you have to make."

"But I also understand people who say it's counter-productive to try too hard to adapt everything to the village situation. I think there's a tendency for some teachers to make excuses along with the adaptations they make. These teachers bend over backwards for the students and say 'Well, they can't learn because. . . .' I don't think that's a good idea."

Using Journals to Keep Up with Students

Like many rural teachers, Austin is constantly busy. In addition to teaching a full load, coaching, and playing basketball on one of the village teams, he is also the music teacher, the band director, and, recently, has become increasingly involved in the Alaska State Writing Consortium — an offshoot of the Bay Area Writing Project. This latter project requires frequent travel to other rural schools to conduct in-services. I asked him how he managed to keep up with what is going on with his students.

"I use journals to do it. I require all my students to keep journals and to turn them in to me periodically. If I didn't have the journals, it would be very difficult.

"The journals are an idea I got from my coordinating teacher when I was a student teacher. She feels that one way to develop writing fluency is through a journal. The research on writing says that unless you do something in the way of editing and revising, there's not going to be any real improvement in the writing. But the real benefit of the journals is fluency.

"The journal itself is just a spiral notebook. I tell the students, 'Take it home and fill out half a page.' I don't care what they write — it's not going to get corrected. 'You fill out half a page and I'm going to write on the bottom half of the page.' I collect them and return them every day for the first month or so.

"In the beginning, I get, 'I got up, had breakfast, went to school. I had this subject. I went home. I did the dishes. I had supper. I went to bed. My half page is done.' Or sometimes, 'My half page is almost done. Is this enough?' But after a while, I get two, maybe three pages of writing about a problem or situation. And some of them are intensely heavy.

"I had one person write: 'My father is a really religious man and he talks all the time about God and sometimes it really scares me. Sometimes I don't believe it at all. What should I do?'

"I get that kind of stuff. So the real content, dialogue, thinking that's going on in the journals is one of the most meaningful things in my experience with the students. I get to hear not only what they think and do but how they think about things.

"I wish I was at liberty to tell you everything that is in those journals — who's sniffing gas, who's bringing dope into town, where they're meeting to smoke it, who's dating who, who's a virgin, who's not a virgin, who was a virgin yesterday but isn't today — everything, the whole bag is in the journals.

"The Writing Project has taught me a lot more about how you can work with the journals to make their writing better. Up to now, I've been scared to death to say things like 'Gee, you really ought to write longer sentences or start combining your sentences.' I'd be afraid of cutting the flow.

"Sometimes students will invite me to their houses — particularly since we started the music program. I'll be walking home across the village and Carlson and Jimmy will come up and say, 'Come on over. We want to play a song for you.' And we'll go over to Carlson's house and they'll do this song.

"But even in those situations, the contact is teacher-student. It's not like you're actually a student listening to the flow, finding out what's the buzz. That I get out of the journals. Because when they're writing in their journals, they're almost writing to me as if I were one of them. And my replies to them are also that way — they're totally outside the teacher mode.

"I talked to you before about how, once in a while, you can step outside the teacher role to get a certain personal communication across. Well, the journals are always like that."

Banding Together

It's graduation day in the village. Except for the fact that but twelve Seniors are graduating and three feet of snow remain on the ground, it could be graduation day just about anywhere. There is the last-minute rush to iron dark trousers and white dresses, the nervous fiddling with mortar boards that refuse to perch on carefully coiffed heads, the butterflies rampant in the stomachs of students and supervisors, the beaming parents, the screaming siblings — and the band.

This is the first band ever for the village. The band wasn't Austin's idea; it was Sherman's, his Native aide.

"One day, I said to Sherman, 'If you could make ten changes in the classroom effective tomorrow, what ten changes would you make?' The next day, there was this neat list, laboriously typewritten, sitting in my pigeon hole. They're all incredibly good ideas. One of them is to start a music course.

"So I went to the principal, told him about Sherman's idea, and he said, 'Go ahead.' So Sherman and I spent a few hours after school getting ditto masters set up, arranging for space, getting the electric piano out of mothballs — stuff like that. Now, this is on Sherman's free time — he doesn't get paid to do this.

"The first year we didn't do much. We covered sight reading notes for choral music and maybe about five good warm-up exercises and a couple of rounds and one major song. But it was such a hit with the kids that I wrote up a letter of commendation for Sherman's personnel file.

"Then the village chose to spend their Adult Education funds on musical instruments. I put together an order for instruments and music. We checked out the instruments to people in the village and then called them back in for the high school students. That first year we met as a class twice a week so about all they knew was how to put together and take apart their instruments. The second year, we worked hard on three pieces. That's what we prepared for graduation."

Austin is in his classroom, shuffling through sheet music when Brenda comes in, followed by other members of the band. Austin looks up as Brenda speaks in a low, almost breathless voice, "If I don't come to graduation, will you fail me?" She smiles and squints at Austin, towering above her.

Austin rears back, looks aghast, throws up his hands and exclaims, "You bet I will! You'll not only fail, you'll be back in the fifth grade!" He smiles down at her and looks at the other faces. "You have to be there — and change your tee-shirt. You've got to look good. Your brother's graduating. Come on now, let's look sharp."

Still looking terrified, the group retreats from the room. "You wouldn't believe what we went through to get to this point." Austin talks as he arranges the music and checks each set. "Classes were good — but they were just hell, too. We held them over there." He extends his thumb over his shoulder toward a row of frame buildings that look like old military barracks and were once the BIA school. Now, they are used as a shop, weight room, and Head Start classroom. "So there was a lot of temptation to get side-tracked.

"I'd get over there and they'd be tooting, fluting, blowing, and banging, and making all kinds of noise. I'd usually give them a few minutes to get their instruments squawked and squeaked. Then I'd walk up to the front of the room and I'd say something like, 'All right! It's time to turn over to page — Shut up!' and I'd be laughing. I couldn't help it. It was a riot. Then I'd say, 'O.K., let's give this a try. This first measure, these instruments here are going to be playing E flat, you guys over there are going to be playing D, and you guys here, G. O.K.? Ready? Let's tune up on the count of four. One, two, three, four — BLAH-AH-AH. . . .'

"Usually, I'd be very graphic about what it sounded like and my face would look like I was a horse at the trough. I'd say, 'That was good for clearing your throat; now let's play it — MUSIC — Remember, music? What music sounds like? You guys like music, don't you? Why are you doing this to me?' And then we'd go through it. It was fun."

The ceremonies are about to begin. Almost the entire village has streamed into the gym. The Seniors are straightening mortar boards and ties in an adjoining classroom. As Austin leaves his room, a tall muscular young man, his black hair so low over his brow that he looks almost menacing, joins him, matching him stride for long stride.

"Austin."

"Yeah, John."

"I'm scared."

"So am I."

They enter the gym together and walk over to the semi-circle of folding chairs set up for the band. John goes to an empty chair, lifts the clarinet off the seat, and sits down. The other nine members are already in their places, facing the audience in the stands. Knees and fingers bounce and fidget. Beads of sweat glisten on the bridges of ten noses. Austin sets his music and other papers on a music stand. He then takes out a bundle of paper from among these and begins to hold them up one at a time. The band members alone can see them.

Slowly, giggles break out in the band. On each page is written a message for a different band member: "JOE, WATCH ME AT THE END". . . . "JOHN, TOOT, DON'T WOOT". . . . and so on. The very last paper reads "GOOD LUCK." The brittle tension of a few minutes before shatters. The band, with only minor discord, breaks into "Pomp and Circumstance." The music sounds surprisingly good. At the end, the audience applauds loudly and Austin motions to them to stand and bow.

After the ceremonies are over and the band has played two more tunes to the delight of the audience, the students carry their instruments back to Austin's room to put them away.

"Everybody said we should play more, Austin."

"Yeah, should we go play another one?"

Austin smiles, remembering their reluctance of an hour ago. "No. You don't want to do the same piece twice."

"That was pretty good."

"Yeah, everybody remembered everything."

The band members are obviously impressed with their own performance. Austin doesn't say much but is pleased to see the pride the students take in what they have done.

Later, Austin confides, "That music class and the journals are the most important factors in my relationship with the students."

Learning as Excitement

For Austin, this relationship is key to his sense of professional accomplishment.

"What I really enjoy most about teaching here is that most of the kids genuinely like me and I genuinely like them back. I also feel that the kids that have graduated are well-prepared and that those who haven't graduated yet have made good growth.

"I think teachers in rural areas can have an enormous influence on kids' lives. Because kids here are very trusting, more so than in urban areas. There is very little suspicion or wariness on their part as to your motives. A teacher can kill the spark in a student or keep it alive."

The kind of relationship Austin has with his students comes at a price: "What's tough is not being able to communicate in English to people of my own age about some things that are really important to me. That's just an aspect of isolation."

What is really important to Austin? Certainly learning is important — less for its utilitarian value than for the sheer pleasure of growing intellectually and engaging the questions that have challenged thinkers across cultures and ages. During one of my visits to the village, I walked to the post office with Austin to pick up a box of books from the booksellers for whom he had worked in Amherst. He carried the books back to the school through the fresh deep snow of a March storm. The snow was wet and heavy with the promise of spring.

In his classroom, he carefully opened the box, removed the packing, took the first book — a volume of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* — out, and sat at his desk to peruse it. Gently, he opened it to the middle, smoothed the pages and the binding against the desk, opened it again at roughly a quarter the way through the pages, and repeated the process about three-quarters the way through. He continued in this fashion to flex the binding. He showed the same care in handling the half dozen other books that he took out of the box. Each he took time to open carefully, flex the binding, and glance through. Other titles included linguistic and literary studies. Having seen the libraries of a number of rural English teachers, I can report that a volume of criticism of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is not commonplace.

Austin lingered longest over the dictionary. He looked up several words at random and read aloud the etymologies, various definitions, and historical examples. Bent over the small type, his face almost Kierkegaardian in its ascetic thinness and intensity, he emanated a kind of intellectual restlessness that I associate with medieval scholastics. In Austin's presence, I sometimes had the feeling that he was searching for the intellectual equivalent of the philosopher's stone: An idea or concept that would, like a golden thread, pull together the chaos of his knowledge, experience, and feelings.

This quest — or some other — keeps his mind hungry. He is constantly learning — whether about linguistics, basketball, writing, literary criticism, music, teaching, or Yup'ik. From watching him teach, I sense that he wants his students to derive the same excitement and pleasure from learning and intellectual engagement that he does. The urge to share his excitement appears to fuel the high energy levels and the spontaneity he exhibits in the classroom. He has consciously toned down his act in the village.

"When I was a student teacher back East, I used to have to change my shirt after teaching a class. You have to put out a lot of energy to capture and hold thirty-five teenagers who come to you bored out of their gourds. But here, they don't want to be talked at a lot. So I've toned things down."

Austin elaborated further on the adjustments he had to make in living and teaching in rural Alaska during another conversation. "I think the biggest problem is just being yourself — being honest without transgressing local customs. And by that I mean living the lifestyle to which you are accustomed without violating local mores. I think to be effective, I must be as honest as possible with my students. But here you can't always be that way. You have to learn to hammer out a middle way. The temptation for me is to be injudiciously honest."

Expectations

Just as he pushes himself to test his own limitations, Austin also pushes his students. "High expectations" in this village go beyond achievement test scores and higher-order cognitive performance. College attendance and a professional career are also expectations. In Austin's classroom these expectations translate into the higher-order discussions that grow out of his questions about reading texts — "Why did he do/say that? . . . What do you think was going through her mind then? . . . Why did the author use the word 'furious'? . . . What would have happened had he not stood by his friend? . . . What do you think you would have done if you had been him? . . . How else might the author have ended the story? . . . Why do you think he ended it the way he did?"

Such discussions also occur in other classroom. Jim Duffy, the principal and teacher of Senior English, works with his students on writing their own poetry. The poetry serves both to improve writing and thinking skills and to help students confront some of their emotions. Carol Duffy teaches a lab-based science program. Her students brainstorm about the results they anticipate before they perform experiments. Such predictions allow her to "read" her students' logic and to spot their misconceptions.

Clearly, Austin does not work in isolation. His expectations for his students must be seen against the background of the expectations of other faculty and parents. While not a high percentage of the graduates do go on to college, the number has increased in recent years. This reflects the efforts of a faculty committed to high standards and a community which supports the faculty. Students who get the same message in all their classes and at home aren't confused about expectations.

Like Austin, Jim and Carol have made an effort to get to know the community. Jim has become fluent in Yup'ik Eskimo — no mean accomplishment — and, like Austin and Carol, plays on a village basketball team. Together with other members of the school staff, they have consciously sought to increase the number of students who go on for post-secondary training. During Jim's tenure as principal, achievement test scores have risen and faculty meetings have become occasions for discussing genuine issues of pedagogy and curriculum, not just "administrivia" and gripes.

This support network appears very important both in determining the nature of "high expectations" in the village and in the success Austin has enjoyed as a teacher. Without the consensus among the faculty and between the faculty and the village, high expectations of the type I found in the village may not be possible. I asked Austin about the village's expectations for the students.

"I think people in the village are generally happy with the way things are going. They are very supportive of raising the achievement test scores. At the same time, they're not giving a lot of specific directions to the teachers or to the principal. I'd say they seem happy with the progress students are making." My discussions with village leaders and school board members confirmed what Austin said. While much of the village's attention is focused on Jim as principal, the consensus on Austin is that he is a good teacher. One former student told me, "He's really O.K. If you have a problem, he always helps you. He's pretty funny, too." Another one told me, "He makes you work hard but he listens to you."

Getting Along in Close Quarters

Although Austin feels good about the job he's done in the village, he has also had to deal with a problem which is typical of small rural schools: A personality conflict with another teacher.

In an urban or suburban environment, teachers usually leave their colleagues and such conflicts behind them at the end of the day. In a small rural village, escape is not so easy. Teachers are constantly thrown together. Whether or not you wish to, you will unavoidably meet your nemesis — or nemeses — several times each day.

I asked Austin to describe how the conflict developed.

"Before I even came out here for the first time, the folks at the district office in Bethel dropped all this Title I paperwork on me and said, 'Here — you're responsible for the Title I program at your school.' I was new and didn't really know what that entailed so I said O.K.

"When I got out here, I found out that I had these tests to give — I think they were the Stanford Achievement Math Tests. They had been given in all the previous years so I figured it was pretty routine. I wrote a little note to all the teachers saying that we needed to do these tests for Title I and here's the test packet and so on.

"So I was taking these test packets around to all the teachers. It was maybe three days into the school year. I went into Ted's room and I said, 'This is the stuff that I need back from your kids.' And the reaction was, 'Yeah, fine, but next time why don't you give me a little warning.' The tone was pretty thick with resentment and anger.

"I was taken aback by that, I must say. I said, 'Well, I've just given these out to every teacher in the school. It isn't a warning or anything. It's the beginning of the year. I guess it's always done about now.'

"And he said, 'Well, that's fine. I just like to get a little warning when I have to do something like this in my classroom.'

"So I said, 'Hey, fella, just come down off your high horse and take it easy.'

"'You come down off your high horse! You're the one who has been walking around here like a king!'"

Telling the story, Austin was still trying to work out what had gone on.

"Ted is a very intelligent, quick-thinking, covers-a-million-subjects type person. Maybe he was jealous of his reputation as being a very serious, intellectual person. Maybe he saw me as some kind of a threat.

"At any rate, my first year was hell. If it hadn't been for the kids, I wouldn't have come back. We had another run-in when he was stringing some electrical lines between the school and the houses. Then the next day, he stopped by my classroom and asked me to drop in on him to talk. Well, I went down to talk to him. What he really wanted to do was to recite a list of every possible reason he didn't like me. He finished up by telling me that everyone on the faculty felt the same way about me.

"I was crushed. The whole time it's going on, I'm wondering, 'How much of this is true? Am I really that much of a jerk?' I just had to leave. He asked me, 'Don't you have anything to say?' I didn't.

"When word got around about that confrontation, the other teachers were very supportive of me. It would have been difficult to handle otherwise.

"My second year, things between us were just cold and neutral. Then, the third year, Ted's attitude seemed to change. I was very guarded because I was still hurt but Ted was actually very nice. He was a good co-worker and a good professional."

Such conflicts seem inevitable in small schools. When I taught in a small rural school, my best friend on the staff stopped speaking to me for about two weeks. When I asked him about it a half-year later, he couldn't remember why he had been angry with me.

Being Successful in Small Rural Schools

I sensed that Austin's feelings for his students carry him through a lot of rough times, both personal and professional. When I asked him what he thought teachers needed to teach successfully in village schools, his response spoke to these feelings: "You have to really like to be with kids. You have to be the kind of person who really gets a kick out of watching kids grow and improve — the kind of person who comes running down the hall and says, 'Wow! Look at this score, man! I can't believe this! Look at this test he wrote!' Or who really gets off on a classroom discussion that involves analysis and evaluation, higher-order thinking.

"And another thing is — you've got to be a good listener. As a teacher, you have these objectives or ideas about where you should be going. Then somebody will say something that isn't in the direction you want to go. So you won't listen to it carefully. But if you want to understand why this student is not saying what you want or expect him to, you've got to listen. Then, your answer is right there. You can ask, 'Why do you say that?' and get a response, 'Well, because this, this, and this.' And in the response will be something you can work with. That's how the students reveal to you the way they think. You've got to be ready for it, listening for it.

"A lot of times I miss it. I just go right by it. I need to work on my listening skills. Which reminds me of the other requirement for this job: Being into self-growth. Any way, shape, or form."

I asked him why that was important.

"Because we're the models. We're right up front. Their first models are their parents, older siblings and peers. Then we're next in line.

"We're hoping that these kids are going to be awakened and turned on by learning, that they'll go out and be self-disciplined. If they see us sitting around like a bunch of dead-heads not doing anything and just being content to swill beer or get stoned. . . . They're not going to believe in what we're saying unless they actually see us working on something, trying to get better. They really need that kind of a model because there are plenty of other kinds of models around.

"It comes down to how a person gets the most out of life. For me, the most apt analogy for growing and not growing is being alive and being dead."

A lot of the elements in Austin's effectiveness are fairly predictable — his enthusiasm for ideas, literature, and learning; careful planning and preparation; his feel for the teachable moment and his ability to seize that moment; his awareness and constant monitoring that enables him to know when to drop something that isn't working and go with another activity; his knowledge of his students and their community; and his absorption with the craft of teaching.

Such conventional conceptions of effective practice may miss, however, the most critical ingredient of all: The intensity Austin brings to bear on subject matter, methods, and students.

I remember best the expression on his face as he looked over his *Oxford English Dictionary*. His excitement was almost palpable as if each fragile page might shed light on the unknown. Such excitement — about language, about literature, about learning — is fuel for Austin's intensity.

KATHERINE

Shoulder-to-Shoulder: Writing Tutorials

Beyond the line of windows, the Yukon River is still frozen. The brown stains in the ice along the banks promise that breakup will come despite the large wet snowflakes falling from leaden clouds. The winter has been long. The continuing cold and snow seem to dampen spirits. Everyone in the village is anxious to get their boats into the water, to repair gillnets and fishwheels, and to prepare for the king salmon run due at the end of June — just a month and a half off.

Katherine appears unaffected by the languor that dogs her students' movements. During her fourteen years in the village, she has seen longer winters than this. She is preoccupied not with breakup and the coming fishing season but with her students finishing their work before the academic year ends.

Scattered about the large, open-ceiling classroom that doubles as the school library, Katherine's eight Juniors are working on their research papers. She is sitting at a round table at the front of the room preparing for the teaching situation in which she excels: the one-on-one, shoulder-to-shoulder tutorial.

The six young men in the room are big. They easily tower over their teacher who is, herself, above average in height. Katherine is apparently oblivious of their size advantage. She is an unrelenting task master and she's on their cases: With but two weeks remaining in the school year, some have hardly begun their papers.

Katherine's English classes are famous — in the school and in the district — in part because of these papers. Students do not advance to the next year's English class nor graduate without completing "The Paper." Sitting alone, Katherine is a regal presence. Her hair is still black, her posture erect, and her movements graceful. Her face is creased by a life whose trials have failed to erode the humor just beneath the skin. Behind her glasses, her dark eyes are alert and intelligent.

One by one, she calls the students forward to join her at the table.

They come with notes, papers, and books, to slouch in the chair beside her.

"Darrell, I'd like to see you, please."

"For what?" mumbles a large young man slumping in a desk at the back of the room. Under a sleeveless T-shirt his shoulders are thick and his biceps knotty. Jet black hair nearly covers his eyes.

"Because you're so handsome, I want you near me." The other students giggle. Katherine, although seated, has one hand on her hip and is tapping a pencil menacingly on the table. Suddenly, her voice hardens, "Now get up here!"

The tone is sufficient to motivate even a six-foot, two-hundred pound young hulk. Sheepishly, Darrell stands, gathering the papers and notecards on his desk.

"I want these papers finished in two weeks." Wham! Katherine brings her flat palm down hard on the tabletop. The room goes dead quiet.

Darrell shuffles forward. His T-shirt says, "Mt. Edgecumbe." Darrell, like several other secondary students at Kalkano, had attended the BIA boarding school in Sitka the year before. When Mt. Edgecumbe closed, he boarded with an aunt in Kalkano so that he could attend the village high school. Darrell was to tell me later that he found the village school more demanding than the boarding school had been. A major difference between the two schools, according to Darrell, was Katherine Harrison.

Darrell sits in a chair opposite Katherine at the table. "Get over here!"

Darrell rises grudgingly to his feet again and lurches over to the chair beside Katherine. As he sets his papers, books, and notecards on the table, Katherine picks them up.

"At least Darrell used the notecards I gave him," Katherine says to the whole class.

"They're all filled up with notes," Darrell claims, swallowing his laughter.

Katherine shuffles through the cards, looks at Darrell, then announces to the class, "I take it back — he hasn't used them." Using the stack of cards, she pretends to hit Darrell over the head.

"Where are your notes?" Katherine asks, opening her hands in front of her.

"I'm ready to write," claims Darrell cockily and leans back in his chair, his hands interlaced behind his head. Using his knee for leverage against the table edge, he tilts his chair on its back legs.

Katherine pushes his knee down, knocking him from his perch. "I need to see plenty of notes before you are ready to begin. I want to see a lot more work from you."

Darrell sits impassively, slumped down in the chair.

Katherine leafs through the papers on the table. "I'm not going to do this for you. O K. . . . Let's see what we've got . . . 'Great players on offense and defense. . . .'"

While Katherine writes, Darrell works at looking bored and above-it- all. A seventeen-year-old smirk has occupied his face. His big arms are folded across his chest.

Pushing the paper toward Darrell, Katherine says, "Here are some general areas. I want to see pages of notes."

"Pages of notes," Darrell echoes in a tone that mixes mockery with genuine disbelief.

Ignoring the tone, Katherine continues, "Now get me that encyclopedia. You don't know how to take notes." She opens the encyclopedia. She looks at the encyclopedia, then at the paper on the table, and back at the encyclopedia.

"Oh hell," she slaps her forehead melodramatically and looks at the slouching boy-man beside her, "You're basketball and I thought it was boxing. Eric is boxing." She leafs through the volume in her hand. "This is the *World Book Encyclopedia* . . . I'm going to use abbreviations in taking notes. I'm just going to show you how to take notes. Now, I said to start with the history of the game. So, first I read what it says about history. Let's see . . . 1891," she scans over the page, " . . . and here is something about 'Professionals'. . . ."

Katherine places a notecard before her. "Now, don't write down everything." She scans the page again. "Maybe I want to say something about Massachusetts as the birthplace of basketball." She jots down a few notes and looks back at the book. "I want to say something about the thirteen basic rules at that time." Again she writes.

Maintaining his pose of aloofness, Darrell is nonetheless watching Katherine who is reading from the encyclopedia, "O.K., here we see that the backboard wasn't brought in until 1894. And . . . let's see . . . they used a bag, not a net."

Darrell's interest gets the better of him and, almost in spite of himself, he speaks, "First they used a half-bushel basket."

"So maybe you would want to start with 'Basket Changes.'" Katherine writes this on a card and reads aloud as she continues to write, "'. . . half-bushel basket . . . then, they used a bag . . . then, metal baskets . . . and, finally, from 1913, they used string . . .'"

Katherine looks up and stares at a student whispering to his neighbor. "Eric." The young man stops whispering and picks up a book open on his desk. The other students in the class are working on their papers. Katherine's voice is the only sound heard.

"' . . . similar to today.'" Katherine finishes writing on the card. She sits back and looks at Darrell. "I don't expect you to read as rapidly as

I do but I sure expect to see more work. You get busy now and work on it during study hall and before you leave today I want you to bring me what you've done so I can see how much you've completed."

Darrell rises, his smirk intact. Despite his size and the smirk, I feel sure he will have something to show Katherine by the end of the day. (And, indeed, as Katherine and I sat talking over coffee after school, Darrell, sheepish and determinedly unconcerned, came in and dropped on the table a dozen notecards, covered with smudged handwriting.) "Marvin," Katherine calls out as she writes in her gradebook. To no one in particular, she explains, "I'm writing down who I'm helping today so I remember who I need to see tomorrow."

A thin young man wearing glasses and dressed in a t-shirt and jeans takes Darrell's place at the table.

Katherine picks up the papers he has brought with him and looks through them. "Is that all you have?" she asks, looking at the young man for the first time.

He nods, looking at his paper.

Summoning up her most exasperated tone, Katherine asks, "Marvin, are you going to pass this course?"

"That's right." Marvin's tone is quietly defiant, cool.

"You aren't trying," Katherine says, picking up his papers again. "Did you take Composition last year?"

"Um-hum," Marvin grunts.

"What did you write on last year?"

Perhaps in response to Katherine's question, perhaps not, a group of three boys just to Katherine's side begin to laugh. Katherine turns to them immediately. "You guys mind your own business. Not one of you is in excellent shape." Then, reconsidering this last remark, she corrects herself, looking at one of the three, "Ben, you're not too far off-track," and, then, looking at the other two boys, "but you others have a long way to go."

Apparently noticing something amiss in the class, Katherine looks around the room. "Who's on the floor in the back?" One of the students rises to a sitting position so that Katherine can see him, waves a hand at his teacher, and then returns to his book and notecards spread around on the floor.

In the meantime, Marvin has been reading from the book he brought up with him.

"O.K., what have you found out about all-terrain vehicles?" Katherine asks, turning her attention back to Marvin.

In response, he hands her a notebook page on which are scribbled a few notes.

The boys at the adjacent table have started to talk again. Katherine turns and stares at them. They quiet down.

Marvin asks something about the book he's using. Katherine responds, "I don't care which book you use — encyclopedia, whatever — but I want a page of notes from you by the end of the day."

Marvin collects his papers and returns to his seat.

"O.K., Robbie, I want to see you please." One of the young men who had been talking earlier gets up from his table and slides his body into the chair beside Katherine. The guys in this class, all rising Seniors, are definitely into "cool." Each tries to appear more nonchalant, less interested, and more devil-may-care than the last.

Katherine ignores these attempts at ultimate cool. She glances over the papers Robbie has brought with him. "You're taking the notes that you wrote earlier and putting them into your own words, is that it?"

Robbie, a member of the school band, has a drum stick in his hand and is beating out the rhythm of an imaginary number. He exaggerates the movement of his already bobbing head to confirm Katherine's conclusion.

Katherine continues to study the papers on the table. Robbie keeps the beat.

"Your first paragraph is all right." Katherine is not given to extravagant verbal praise. She reads on.

She looks up at Robbie, puts her hand over the drum stick, and asks, "Are you sure you're not trying to get down every detail that you read about?"

Robbie listens, still at last.

"I didn't ask for a paper that was too long. Just about seven pages. I'm not asking for every detail you uncover about the topic, just the highlights. If I were to ask you to put this on the computer, you'd have quite a bit." A completed paper is entered on the Apple using the Zardex Word Processing program and is then printed out.

Robbie is still listening, apparently trying to understand what Katherine is saying but not wanting to appear too interested.

Katherine shuffles through the papers and asks, "Where's your outline?"

Robbie does not answer but picks up the beat again.

"I've been talking outline, outline, outline for two months now." Katherine increases the volume a notch or two for this last remark. Her target is the whole class, not just Robbie. She does this periodically during these conferences to let the other students know that she's aware of them and mistakes that are common to all of them. She pauses, waits for some response from Robbie. When none comes, she continues, "You should have it first. That way you can see how much you should write on each section. . . ." She reads on.

Putting the papers down, she looks at them, picks them up again, puts them down, picks up a clean sheet, and says, "Let's see where you've gone." With Robbie, Katherine's tone is quieter, warmer, more equalitarian than it was with Darrell. The tone communicates Katherine's recognition that Robbie has made a concerted effort to complete the assigned task. Her words communicate that effort isn't enough: Product is paramount.

Katherine is holding Robbie's paper so that they both can see it. "You're opening paragraph is O.K. But then, see, you've jumped directly to your summary. . . ." Katherine makes a few notes on the clean sheet before her.

"I think you're trying to say too much in this paper . . ." Katherine is interrupted by a student who asks where he can find a certain book. Katherine tells him how to look it up in the card catalogue and then turns her attention back to Robbie's paper and the sheet that she has been writing on.

"Now, see what I've just done . . ." She shows him her notes. Robbie has stopped drumming. "You see how you've jumped around to various things. . . . There's nothing directing the information you've gathered. . . . If you made an outline and said, 'O.K. — this is what I want in my introduction. Then, maybe I want to give a little history. Then in the next part of the paper I'm going to do a description of the Games.' Then, under that we might have 'Summer Events' as a subtopic and 'Winter Events' as another subtopic. This may or may not be important but I can't really say because I still don't know what your controlling purpose is."

"I have a lot about Olympic Champions," Robbie says, his first articulate contribution to the discussion, although he has been keeping the silent beat with his drum stick.

"I wouldn't go any further than some of the special champions. You don't want it to be too long. You've already done so much writing. I think what I'd do next is say, 'O.K., I don't have it in just the right order. What should I eliminate?'"

Katherine looks at the paper, examining each page quickly and turning to the next. "I'd eliminate this whole page and this side. The whole thing needs reorganization — even if it means cutting and pasting."

Robbie's lost the beat and is staring quietly at the table.

"If it were me," — Katherine points to herself — "I'd go through what I'd written here and I'd say to myself, 'O.K., I'm going to put this on Zardex next week. So I'm just going to cut and clip now. I'd put the history part first.'"

Katherine gets up, goes to her desk in the corner, and returns with a sheet of foolscap. "It means taking a long sheet of paper like this, finding those parts of the paper that are still pretty good, cutting them out and pasting them on here."

With a pair of scissors from her desk, Katherine begins cutting a page of Robbie's paper. "I want the history part first so I'll cut out the parts that deal with history and glue them on the paper here." She runs a glue stick across the back of the cutting and sticks it onto the piece of foolscap. "Then, I'm going to try to keep it along the lines of my outline. You understand?"

Robbie stares at the page she has created with the cuttings. He nods his head despondently.

Sensing his disappointment, Katherine tries to encourage him. "See, you're trying to write too much," she says in a soothing tone. "And that's because you have no organizing idea. That's what the outline is for." She points to the sheet of paper on which she has sketched out an outline. "So I'm saying you've got to follow your outline and to do that you need to cut this off here" — she points to a spot on the first page of Robbie's paper — "this is really the beginning of your paper."

Robbie sits very still.

Katherine seems uncertain about how to get him started again. "Do some cutting and eliminating." She picks up the pages of his paper from the table and takes them to a longer table close by. "So you need to maybe go to where you can spread out."

Robbie gets up slowly and moves to the longer table. He sits down, rests his elbows on the tables, and stares at the pages before him.

Katherine watches him for a few moments, appears to decide not to intervene further now, and calls out, "Eric."

A short boy who looks at least a couple of years younger than anyone else in the class sits down in the chair that Robbie has vacated.

Katherine looks at her watch and, then, around the room. Five minutes remain in the period. "Tomorrow, I'll pick up where I left off. Some of you are just copying what you see in a book." Robbie doesn't look up at this reference to his work. "You're not stopping to think, 'What is meaningful for my paper?'"

Katherine sits down. "Eric," she looks at him but he is staring out the window. She pokes him in the shoulder with her forefinger. He looks at the paper she is holding up in her hand. "O.K., you have quite a bit here." She looks at the next page. "This section I'm not too sure about. Are you talking about lightweights or heavyweights or . . . ?"

"Heavyweights."

"And you're going to concentrate on these three?"

The boy nods, biting his pencil like a bit.

"Did you ever find any information on Rocky . . . what's his name?"

"Marciano. Yeah," he grunts through the pencil.

"How about on these other two?"

Using the pencil to point to a name on the page, Eric responds, "Not on him."

"O.K., forget the one you haven't found any information on. You can introduce that paragraph like this — " Katherine writes on another sheet — "'Two boxers who have come up from Latin America. . . .'" She continues to write and Eric looks on. She stops and leans back.

"How many categories or classifications are there?"

"Heavyweight, light-heavyweight, middleweight, lightweight, flyweight, featherweight, bantamweight."

"Six?"

"Seven."

Katherine talks as she writes, "O.K., in your introductory paragraph, you can mention that there are seven classes for boxers — depending on the boxer's. . . ." She looks at Eric and asks, "Does their height have anything to do with it?"

"No." Not looking up, Eric smiles, apparently amused by his teacher's ignorance.

Sliding the sheet she has been writing on toward Eric, Katherine adds, "Why don't you get started writing on this section?"

Several students at the back of the room have gathered up their books and are hanging around the classroom door. Katherine sees them and says, "The bell did not ring. Come back and sit at your desks." The students roll their eyes and return to their desks, dragging the toes of their Adidases on the carpet.

Katherine turns back to Eric, "You don't think there are any more thrown fights?"

"There sure are a lot of fights in casinos in Las Vegas and that's where a lot of underworld guys hang out," responds Eric cautiously.

The buzzer signals the end of class. One of the students who is gathering his papers, asks Katherine, "Do you ever watch fights, Katherine?" It's the first time I've heard a student use Katherine's first name in school although outside of school everyone called her Katherine.

She later confided that she doesn't object to students addressing her by her first name although she doesn't encourage them to do so. Her concern was that the students called all the Native teachers and aides by their first names — a double-standard that violated her sense of equity. "They should either address all of us formally or all of us informally."

Straightening desks and picking bits of paper off the floor, Katherine replies to her questioner, "Not if I can help it. I can do without boxing.

I think it is a very primitive sport."

A Second Career

Any time educators or board members from interior Alaska talk about effective teachers, Katherine Harrison's name comes up. Yet in many respects she does not fit the conventional image of a village teacher. She dresses casually but tastefully with attention to details. Even during breakup when mud finds every crack like some horror movie fungus, Katherine is bedecked with earrings and other jewelry, her slacks are sharply creased, and her hair is neatly arranged.

After fourteen years in the village, she doesn't have to prove herself. She knows how to sew skins — but doesn't. She doesn't understand much Athabaskan — but more than some of her students. She prefers the latest best-seller to academic descriptions of Athabaskan culture.

Katherine insists on high standards in her classroom — and provides opportunities for her students to meet them. "I think a lot of my attitude developed when I first came here," she told me in the comfortable double-wide modular home she shares with her husband, Bob, who teaches the fifth and sixth grades. Relaxing in a swivel-rocker, her legs tucked under her, surrounded by books and news magazines, Katherine continued, "Some of the teachers felt they were doing folks here a favor: Teaching these poor, dumb souls who can't learn but so much. My feeling is and always was — they can learn as much as any other kid. It's like I'm always telling them—'You've got a billion-dollar computer in your head—Use it!'"

"A lot of my attitudes come from my own upbringing." Katherine grew up in a family that put a high premium on learning — and hard work. "In my family, you weren't allowed to say you couldn't. 'Can't' wasn't in the family vocabulary. You were allowed to say you didn't know something — as long as you rectified the situation quickly. That's why it irritates me when students just automatically say, 'I don't know. . . I don't know. . .' My response to that is: 'Get the encyclopedia or a book and find out — now!'"

Unlike other teachers who back away from students when they respond "I don't know" to questions, Katherine is more likely to bear down. Katherine's students have apparently learned this. "I don't know" is heard less frequently in her class than in any other rural high school class I've visited or taught.

Katherine also grew up loving books and reading. "When I was young and my parents wanted to punish me, they would take away my library card. That meant that I had to go find a sympathetic aunt who'd let me check out books on her card."

Katherine's determination has been a thorn in the side of more than one administrator. She told me of a principal who decided she was a troublemaker — "Probably because I wasn't shy about expressing my feelings about things." To retaliate for what he believed was insubordination, he reduced her English Department book budget to $50.00. "I asked him why he wanted to penalize the students simply because he and I didn't see eye-to-eye."

Undetered, Katherine used her own money to buy books. The following year, the principal didn't return. Katherine did.

Katherine's love of literature has been a constant in her life that began in Wilmington, Delaware. During the decades before World War II, Wilmington was a small town to grow up in — smaller still because Katherine grew up in the the black part of town. "Everything was segregated then. There was only one black high school in the whole state. So the state paid room and board for students who came from outside of Wilmington — just like the situation for native students in Alaska when I first came here." At that time, native villages did not have high schools. Native students who wanted a high school education could either attend a BIA boarding school or board with a family in an Alaskan city and attend the local high school.

Rather than viewing her segregated education as a disadvantage, Katherine believes her high school experience built self-confidence. "Everyone at that school encouraged you to be somebody. They educated us to succeed and no one doubted that we would. I remember listening to speakers in assemblies — black leaders in business, law, religion, politics, and so on — who warned us against looking for excuses and encouraged us to make the best of whatever opportunities came our way."

From there, Katherine went to Howard University, an exciting place to be just before and during WWII. Thurgood Marshall, Charles Houston and Bill Hastie were there, mapping strategy to overcome the legal barriers to racial equality. Katherine recalls afternoon teas with Mary Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt.

First, the secretarial jobs readily available in wartime Washington and, then, marriage and a move to her husband's hometown of Portland, Oregon, interrupted her undergraduate career. Not until her own children were in college would Katherine finally graduate.

Despite a family that could boast a number of teachers — including a favorite aunt and her godmother — Katherine was never interested in teaching.

"I think I'm a fairly atypical teacher. I had never planned to teach or even wanted to teach. While I was living in Portland, I became involved as a volunteer adult literacy teacher. I decided I needed to learn how to teach reading. I saw an announcement in the paper that they were interviewing candidates for the Teacher Corps. I thought that might be a way to learn more about teaching reading.

"At the time, I was working at the public library. The Teacher Corps was recruiting people who had undergraduate degrees in areas other than education. They even preferred that applicants not have any previous education courses. I had had one — and it had nearly bored me to death. Anyway, I was accepted into the program."

"It was a graduate program for people who already had their B.A.s. During the school year, we worked in the Portland schools as interns under the guidance of master teachers. We had three-fourths of a normal work load.

"The focus of the program was cross-cultural — only it was called 'disadvantaged' back then. I taught in one of Portland's so-called 'model' schools that was ninety-nine percent black. Other members of my team were placed in logging communities and others in migrant worker communities.

"During the summer we did course work on campus. And during the academic year, we had either evening courses or one day each week which was devoted to course work. The professors would come to a site and all the team members would gather there.

"The course work was pretty heavy. In the two years, I had almost a hundred credits. I picked up undergraduate courses in education and graduate courses in psychology, sociology, and even in oceanography. At the end of the two years, we got our Master's degrees.

"So why did you get into teaching, if it was something you had never considered before?" I asked.

"Well, I guess I was involved with education all along. Besides the adult literacy program, I also worked in a teenage literacy program for dropouts and kickouts, I was a leader in Campfire, a Sunday school teacher — and I had five kids. I finally decided that if I was going to work with children I might as well get trained and paid for it.

"My first year in the graduate program, I had one of my own in college. The second year, I had two in college plus two in high school and one in elementary."

Confronting a New Culture: Moving to the Village

I asked what had brought her to Alaska from Portland.

"After I completed my master's, I spent one year working in a federally-funded preschool program. I worked with the teachers and did some curriculum development. Then, after that year I came to Alaska.

"By no means did I plan to stay here for fourteen years. I originally planned to stay for a couple of years — to see what it was like to teach in another culture. I stayed."

I asked what had kept her here for fourteen years.

"The people. I've visited other villages and I still think this is the nicest. The people have been friendly from the time I first stepped off the airplane. That very first evening, some of the women my age came down to visit. Since then, I've been through so many births, marriages, deaths — you become part of the community."

The close-knit community Katherine found in the village was familiar. "I've lived in segregated communities most of my life. I left a very close community in Wilmington to go to a black college that was close-knit. Then, I moved to Portland where, again, the black community was a close group."

I asked her about having a minority perspective on the experiences of Alaska Native children in the world beyond the village.

"It may sound conceited, but I think I can understand them better than people without that perspective. When they are having problems, I think I can picture what it is that is bothering them. Or I can bring it to the front before they can actually verbalize it.

"I'm more sympathetic to their experiences when they go off to town and experience the feeling of — 'Oh, everyone in this place is looking at me. Are they going to tell me that I'm not welcome?' When I first visited Fairbanks fourteen years ago, there were places where Natives were not welcome. I'd like to think that it has all changed now . . . .

"I can also understand their reluctance to leave their home environment. We don't have as many students staying around the village after finishing school as we did eight or nine years ago. When I first came here, the only adults who had been out of the village were those who had been in the hospital or in the armed services or National Guard.

"Now, there's not a student above the sixth grade who has not at least visited, say, an Eskimo village. No one used to visit Eskimo villages. Now, going to Anchorage is like going downtown. We have townspeople who have visited the Philippines and Italy. It's given people a different view of the world, a different view of themselves."

During our interviews and discussions, Katherine returned repeatedly to the theme of responsibility, particularly as this goal is embedded in the Upward Bound program. Katherine views her involvement with this program and the success she had in encouraging young people to take responsibility for their own activities and for recreational and educational events in the village as a high point of her career.

"I worked with the Upward Bound Program for about two and a half years. What made it so satisfying for me was that the kids — especially the first group I worked with — developed such a sense of responsibility. They wanted to do it all — the planning, the organizing, the work. I was really just a facilitator. I would just sit back and they would do their projects. It was very satisfying.

"It was a federally funded program that was administered out of the University of Alaska. Each school that wanted to have a program had to apply for acceptance. Each school program had a teacher-counselor. This individual worked closely with the students, counselling them individually about their career plans, preparing them for post-secondary training, informing them about the summer programs at the University, and prescribing skill activities to make up for deficiencies that they might have in the competencies they would need for post-secondary programs — particularly in the area of study skills.

"And there were a lot of recreational activities as well. The teacher-counselor served as an advisor for these activities. One year, they decided to have a series of story- and play-times for the preschoolers on Sunday afternoons. They also planned dances for the older kids. They had to write up a calendar of events and submit it to the principal for his approval.

"The Sunday afternoon activities for the preschoolers went very well. This was before we had a Head Start program in the village. The students would read them stories and play games with them. They felt that most of the preschoolers weren't being read to at home. The dances were well run, too. They had committees to decorate, to handle refreshments, to handle anyone who tried to come in who had been drinking, and to clean up. I was there just to chaperone.

"So when I hear teachers — and I've heard plenty of them over the years — say that the students aren't responsible enough or they can't do this or that, I like to remind them, 'Well, my group did this and that and so I know they can. But you have to let them know you have faith in them, that you know you can rely on them, that you expect them to be responsible. And they will perform up to your expectations.'"

Her experience with Upward Bound was a touchstone in Katherine's teaching career. As I observed her over the next week, I grew to understand that the Upward Bound experience had vindicated her belief in young people's capacity to make their own plans and to carry them out. Creating opportunities for students to take responsibility and being available to assist when asked is, for Katherine, at the very heart of the teaching enterprise.

Communicating Expectations

The first period after lunch is relaxed. Katherine has her college-prep

English class. These students write, edit, and publish the school newspaper. Much of each period is spent in reading, discussing, editing and correcting the written work of other students. Katherine is circulating around the room, working individually with the six students present.

"Why do I have to correct all the errors even on the papers that won't be part of the paper?"

"So you'll be conscious of the kinds of errors students make and you won't make the same ones," Katherine responds forcefully to a slight young woman in glasses. Katherine raises her voice so the other students, scattered about the room, will hear her. "I want you to correct all these papers."

She leaves the girl's side to search through a flip-top plastic disk storage box for a formatted computer disk so another student can begin to type out an article. Two other students are reading and marking up articles. Another pair are sitting before the other Apple IIc at the back of the room. Behind Katherine, two students watch with barely stifled laughter as she strains to read the labels on the disks in the storage box. She pulls one out, removes it from its sleeve, inserts it into the disk drive, and boots it. First through her glasses and then over the lens, Katherine tries to read the screen.

"Maybe you need one of those computers with the voice synthesizer, Mrs. Harrison," cracks one of the onlookers. He and the other student laugh into their fists. Katherine's poor eyesight is a standing joke with her students.

"If you wait a while, maybe they'll come out with touch-screen programs in Braille." By now, both boys are doubled over, as Katherine leans closer to the screen and raises her hand to shield it from the glare of the afternoon sun.

"Here you go, Rodney"— Katherine rises, still ignoring their jibes — "there's room on this disk for that article." Rodney, a young man with high cheekbones and bright, deepset eyes, takes her place.

Katherine walks over to another male student who is reading through a stack of papers.

"Did you find any you thought we should print, David?"

David nods, not looking up.

Katherine returns to the computer at the waxing laughter of Rodney and his classmate. With their teacher's eyes upon them, the boys' laughter subsides.

Assuming her characteristic stance — her hands on her hips, peering over her glasses, her feet set apart — she interrogates Rodney.

"Rodney, what are you doing next year? Are you going to be at the University?" Katherine asks as though she suddenly doubts Rodney's capacity to consider his future seriously. One of Rodney's sisters just graduated from the University of Alaska and another is a sophomore.

"I think so." Rodney's fingers peck at the keyboard as he watches the video monitor.

"And study what?"

"Maybe education." The angular shadow of his face is cast against the green surface of the screen. His eyes are not visible.

"What subject?" Katherine watches the back of his head.

"I don't know . . . maybe health and P.E. . . ."

"How will you handle ten little Rodneys in your class?" Ah ha — there is a message in this interrogation! Out in the hall, the buzzer sounds the end of the period. No one seems to notice.

"What do you mean?" Rodney continues to hunt and peck.

Katherine picks up the latest issue of *Time* from one of the tables, places it in the magazine rack beside the doorway, bends over to pick up a piece of paper off the floor, and responds, "I want to know if you understand what it means to work with adolescents." She pauses, moving across the room to her desk in the corner. "What are you going to do if they all wait until the last minute to do their work?"

Rodney turns around, his face open in a toothy smile, "Be like you — ten points off!" He rises and, one hand on his hip in imitation, shakes a finger at the ten imaginary Rodneys ranked before him. Dropping the pose, he gathers his books and notebooks. "You're always wiping us out," he adds without looking up.

Katherine, who has been busying herself with the folders she uses to hold each student's work, stops suddenly and turns on the boy who is almost out the door.

"Wait a minute!" Rodney stops but doesn't turn around. "I wipe you out?" The hands are back on the hips. "Who wipes you out?"

Rodney throws back his head and concedes, as he walks out, "O.K. — I wipe me out."

Choices and Alternatives

I had taught some of Katherine's former students at the University. Uniformly, they wrote well, worked hard, and did not come into my class believing, like some of their classmates, that they deserved a "B" just for showing up. Kalkano High School has a reputation for sending a high proportion of its graduates on for post-secondary studies. No doubt, the high educational level of the village has something to do with the persistence of students.

Schooling is not new to Kalkano. Sisters of St. Ann established a school here before 1900. Two local graduates of the University's teacher education program are now teaching at the school and several others are currently in preservice programs. Another major influence is, quite simply, Katherine Harrison.

I had asked students in my educational foundations course to describe an effective teacher as part of their final exam. One of Katherine's former students wrote: "An effective teacher takes pride in what she does. She dresses well, is neat and clean, and expects that her students will take pride in themselves. When students do not do their work, she keeps them in class until work is completed. She does not allow students to disrupt class. But she doesn't have to yell. Students know she means business and one look or word is enough to silence even the most mischievous.

"When she gives an assignment, she doesn't accept sloppy work. If it's not what she wants, the student must do it over again and again until they get it right. She's strict but not mean."

Back at her house after school, I asked Katherine how she reconciled her belief in education with her feelings that college may not be the best option for students coming from a small, Athabaskan Indian village.

"I can sympathize with their fears about the city, about operating in another culture — I have empathy. Now, I'm not saying I was ever that way myself. From the time I was old enough to put my money in the box on the street car, I've been traveling. But I did have friends and worked with young people who had no self-confidence. In Portland, which is a medium-size city, I had junior high students who had never gone downtown by themselves. They were all black kids. My goal that year was that each and every one of those kids would successfully use the bus tokens I gave them to go someplace that I assigned them and come back and report.

"That's why I say I can sympathize and understand very well what it is like to live in a part of the world and not really be part of it, feel that you're not a part — even though I never was that way myself.

"As for higher education, I'm not saying everyone has to go out and get a college education. No way. But I do say — and I say this to the students — that you have to learn that there are choices and alternatives. Until you know what these alternatives are and you have made a choice, you won't be a very contented person. If you've never looked at the alternatives, you won't try them."

Katherine pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose and sips coffee from the cup in her hand. Her voice is low and even richer in its quietness. The ghost of a drawl stretches and rounds the end of her sentences, not Southern but what we called "shore" when I was a boy in Baltimore.

"I tell them, frankly, that I'm afraid they'll end up like some of the ones I've seen who . . . we wonder, 'Why did they kill themselves?'"

For young men in rural Alaska, the suicide rate is three times the national average.

"Just the other day, an ex-student came to see me. He went to the University for a semester and then left. I know he didn't have any trouble with the academic work. But he made the decision after a few months that he'd rather be doing something else. Had he not gone up to the University, had he just stayed at home, he would never have known whether or not he could have done it. He could alibi to himself, could have told himself — 'Sure, I could have done it.' Now he can make the choice — he wants to be a mechanic.

"The same is true for any of them. I am just as glad to see them go to the Job Corps training for nine months and finish as I am to see them go off to college. I try to get them all to do something."

A knock at the door interrupts our conversation. A young man in his early twenties came in the door asking for Katherine's husband, Bob. Katherine introduces me to a young man whose sister was a student of mine at the University. Bob, who has been watching "Monday Night Football" (via satellite), gets up, switches off the television, and leaves with the young man.

After Katherine settles back into her chair, she resumes her monologue. "Now, that one" — nodding her head in the direction of the door and peering over her glasses — "went into the Army after he graduated last year. But he only stayed three-and-a-half months. The Army promised him certain things when he enlisted. Then, they stuck him in the Infantry. They did not give him the training and assignment that they had promised. So he told them he was through. They let him out. I like to think that the school has something to do with that. He made certain choices. He was able to make a decision.

"That's all I hope any of them get when they leave me — an idea of their alternatives, the ability to decide on an alternative, the desire to pursue one of the alternatives, and the skills to succeed academically if that's what they choose."

Raven Stories

"This may not seem like a continuation of what we've been doing but I have decided that I want you to understand some of these stories."

We're back in Katherine's classroom where a dozen eighth grade students sit, some are resting their chins on their elbows, others are whispering to their neighbor, and still others are leafing through the book before them.

Erect and imperial, Katherine moves around the classroom as she talks, straightening desks, picking up bits of paper from the floor, and checking to see that students have their books.

Outside, the May sunshine has burned away the gloom of the morning. Downriver, the high, rocky cliffs catch the light. The sunlight reflecting off the surface of the frozen river is painfully bright. Perhaps spring will deign to come after all.

Katherine has found her way to the back of the room and is standing over two boys. She grasps the edge of their table and pulls it toward the front of the room.

"Sanford and Tom . . . pull your seat over. Put your math book away. You know, you're going to start doing your homework at home." Tom closes the book and pushes it away, smiling sheepishly but not looking up at his teacher standing, hands on hips, over him.

Katherine returns to the front of the room. She opens her book, presses down the binding, and walks over to her desk. She picks up a stack of worksheets and begins to distribute them.

"Who needs a pencil?" she asks as she passes out the papers.

In response to a few murmured "me-s," Katherine digs around inside her desk drawer.

"You know, the Boy Scouts have a motto — 'Be Prepared.' And how many months have I been saying, 'Come to school prepared?'"

The tone is scolding, mocking even, but neither belittling nor uncaring. The students are obviously used to it. They don't look up.

Katherine sits on a high stool at the front of the room, her back arched, her head high. As she adjusts her glasses and begins to speak, no other sound is heard.

"I have been using the Raven stories the past week with two other classes. And the more I think about it, I think you should start reading these in seventh grade. Then, maybe the next year, I won't have to tell you about them.

"Has anyone in here ever heard a Raven story?"

At the back of the table, Sanford is whispering to Tom again.

"Sanford, either move up front or pay attention." Katherine continues, "Have you ever heard a Raven story, Sanford?"

Silence follows. Sanford keeps his eyes down. At the back of the room, a student says something.

"Who told you the story, John?" The boy mumbles something else. "You don't remember?" She waits. "Maybe Grandmother Moffitt?" Silence again. "Your father?"

Katherine has known John — and the rest of the students in the class — almost from birth. She knows which adults in the community remember the old stories and tell them. She knows with whom among these John would have contact.

She wants the boy to talk so she tries another tack.

"But you know you've heard about Raven? Can you tell us what you remember about Raven?" When John doesn't respond, Katherine seems to sense that it's time to back off.

Unlike other teachers who are very conscious not to spotlight students in class, Katherine doesn't hesitate to single out students for attention. This fits with her idea that children need to be prodded, regardless of their cultural background.

Although I saw her prod children, I never saw her embarrass anyone. Her students seemed to be used to her attentions and had adapted to her. What might be unacceptable from a stranger was just Mrs. Harrison to them.

"Well, Raven is a. . . ."

"He stole somebody's son," John blurts out, surprising Katherine. Pleased and encouraged she leans to the side to see John at the back of the room.

"He took the son of someone." Katherine looks around the room, hopeful that others will join the discussion. "And no one else has heard about Raven?"

Katherine waits. When no one responds, she resumes her lecture. "This is a continuation of your heritage because Raven is a central character in Indian and Eskimo myths not only in Alaska but elsewhere.

"Before you start reading on your own and answering the questions I've given you, I thought that I'd go through one story with you. Then, you would read the second story." Off to the teacher's side, a girl says something under her breath.

"Yes, as Gina says, 'Geez, two stories.'" The tone again is slightly mocking, like a parent cajoling a whining child.

Later, at her house, Katherine talked about her manner with the students. "Some of my techniques are just acting like a mother to a large group of kids — 'You either sit down or I'll help you sit down!' We don't really have discipline problems out here. I don't know what I'd do if I went back to the city and had inner-city kids. I can get most of these kids to sit quietly — but it's more than that. If I'm busy talking, I do not like people to be turning pages, looking out the window, or doodling.

"And I don't do as much lecturing as some teachers do. If I'm introducing a new concept or a new author, a new theme or new stories, then I tell them background information to try to get them interested — like when I introduce early twentieth century American literature. I give them time to look at the books we have, to look at the pictures, to see how people were dressing, to see what the inventions of the time were.

I have to remind them of what people did not have — radios, TVs, telephones and so on.

"So, there are times when I'm very dictatorial — 'Sit down and shut up.' But I also try to get across to them that if they are having a problem, we can go to a quiet table to work together." Despite her formal and demanding manner, students do not hesitate to approach Katherine. Her genuine concern for students as learners shines through her irritations with their shortcomings.

Back in her classroom, Katherine is introducing the worksheet she has written to accompany the Raven stories.

"Let's look at the worksheet first. I hope you can read the typing." She begins to read from the dittoed sheet on which the light purple print is barely legible, "'Raven Stories from the Oral Tradition. Characteristics of Raven.'"

Katherine looks up from the sheet and around the room. "What do I mean when I ask, 'What were his characteristics?'"

Several seconds pass before someone ventures a reply. "What he was like."

Katherine looks at the girl who has answered. Quietly she says to the girl, "A little louder." The girl repeats her answer in a louder voice.

Katherine then addresses the whole class: "What he was like. If you were to describe . . . let me think . . ." — she pinches her forehead between her forefinger and thumb in a gesture of concentration. Katherine frequently uses theatrical gestures which contribute to her imperial manner. "I'm trying to think of some television character that you are familiar with."

Sitting upright, John calls out, "J.R.!"

Katherine and the students laugh. Her face broadens, her eyes widen, and quite suddenly, the class is interested. Several students sit up and take notice.

"J.R. is the favorite in every class." Katherine is still smiling. "How would you describe J.R. Ewing?"

Some of the students are involved in the discussion for the first time since class began ten minutes earlier.

"Mean."

"Evil."

Katherine stands, turns to the chalkboard behind her, and writes the students' suggestions, repeating each as she writes — "Mean . . . Evil . . ." She turns back to face the students. "I heard another description."

". . ."

"Did I hear you say 'cool'?"

"Right."

Katherine pauses then begins to write again. "Well, let's use the word 'sophisticated.'" Next to "Sophisticated," Katherine writes "(cool)."

"Sly."

"Okay . . . Sly . . ." Katherine writes and steps back to survey her work. "That's not a bad description." She looks over her shoulder at the class. Sitting back down on the stool, she holds the book in her hands. "Well, you'll find that Raven is a J.R.-type. Mean, sly, evil people usually do what to other people?"

Several seconds pass before a voice calls out, "Trick people."

Katherine nods, "Trick people. So, they use a lot of trickery." Again she interrupts herself with a chuckle. She steps out of her persona as the dominating, imperial teacher. Suddenly confidential, she confesses to the class, "Sometimes my mind just goes blank as I'm trying to think of what I want to say."

She shakes her head, finds the train of her thought, and continues.

"Tricky. I ask you to describe Raven on the worksheet. On the next line you have a place to put the title of the story. Then, the main episodes."

Adjusting her glasses with her elegant fingers, she looks up from the worksheet in her hand. "I had a ninth grader ask, the other day, what an episode is. So, you'll see that I've put 'the main event' in parentheses beside 'episode.'

"Episodes are like the various scenes in a play. You know, plays have acts and acts have scenes. And each scene presents a main idea. I have left space for four episodes — or main events — for each story."

Looking around at the dozen heads bent over the worksheets, Katherine continues, "And, lastly, I want you to summarize the story and think about its main point. Is it a story that teaches you a lesson like a fable? Like, say, 'The Fox and The Grapes.' Who remembers that story? What does the fox do?"

"He tells the crow to sing."

"And then what?"

"Grapes fell out of his mouth."

"What had the fox done to the crow?"

"Tricked him."

"O.K., he tricked him. Can anyone guess what the point of the story was?"

"Don't eat grapes." Katherine laughs with her students. "O.K., let's go back. The crow had the grapes. The fox wanted the grapes. So what did he tell the crow?"

"You're a good singer."

"And was the crow a good singer? No. Crows can only go 'caw, caw, caw.' That was part of the trickery."

Katherine pauses, lets a few seconds pass. Then asks, "Now, what do you think the story taught?"

"Never believe. . . ." A girl in right in front of Katherine starts to answer but stops herself.

"Never believe. . . . ? What?"

"In God," replies an anonymous voice from the back. Again, everyone laughs.

Katherine glances at her watch, taps her foot, and says, "Never believe flattery, the good things people say about you that you know are not true." She walks toward the corner of the room and looks at a girl in front of her. "If I saw you eating an ice cream cone and I told you, 'Coreen, be careful: that ice cream will make you ill,' would you believe me?"

Laughing, Katherine continues, "When I was little, my older brothers would try to make me feel ill about certain foods so they could take whatever it was from me. If I was eating bread pudding, for example, they would try to convince me that the raisins were really flies. But it didn't work. First of all, I was always hungry and would eat just about anything. And, secondly, I had a cast iron stomach and nothing bothered me — even the thought of eating flies.

"Anyway, let's get back to Raven." Katherine then read them a story from the Raven tales, stopping frequently to ask comprehension questions. The students were quiet throughout her reading. Their responses showed they were following closely. When Katherine finished, the students went to work on their worksheets. As they worked, she circulated around the room, reading over students' shoulders, correcting, nagging, or just watching.

Later, Katherine talked about adapting her instruction to her students' cultural background. "I'm certainly not going to stand in front of my class and talk about golf or tennis when I can discuss activities that people here are much more likely to be involved in. So I talk about the things that people do here even if I don't participate in them myself. Like fishing. Everyone here fishes in the summer. I don't. My husband does. He sets nets and that sort of thing.

"Fishing is so important to people's lives that it should not be just something I refer to but a topic. I try to find reading materials that deal with fishing. I use it frequently as a research topic for papers and other writing assignments. Students write descriptions of fish camp, compose stories around fish camp, that sort of thing.

"Even when we talk about things like celebrations, I try to relate whatever we are talking about to Catholic traditions because this is a Catholic village. I contrast Catholic beliefs and customs with those of Muslims and Baptists. I try to work out from their experience, their reality to the wider world, to an awareness of other people's values and lifestyles. But I'd do that anywhere."

More Shoulder-to-Shoulder

Outside, the sun is transforming the morning's snow directly into the brown, silty mud of the Yukon. This is the next to the last period of the day; yet the sun is almost directly overhead.

"Michael, did you ever find the information you needed?"

Leaning both arms on the table, Katherine looks at the boy through her glasses. He is about fifteen, bordering on manhood.

"Not yet." The boy doesn't look up. He holds a fistful of paper, softened and dog-eared by frequent shufflings.

"Not yet?" Katherine's voice is deep and authoritative, edged with exasperation and mock incredulity — the tone of a mother nearly out of patience with a willful child. I heard this tone often during the week I spent in Katherine's classroom.

"You go sit over there," Katherine says to the girl sitting beside Michael, pointing to an empty desk across the room.

Pulling a chair to Michael's side, she sits down. "What resource books are you using?"

With his pencil, Michael points to what he has written, "That. . . .that . . . and that."

Katherine looks up, tilts her glasses back against the bridge of her nose, and addresses the eight other students scattered about the classroom.

"That's another thing — you must have a list of the resources you're using in your paper."

She turns her attention back to Michael who is fingering his papers like a rosary. "Right now — get me an encyclopedia so I can show you what you need to do." Teacher and student rise and walk the few feet to the half dozen metal library shelves ranged along the back of the room. Katherine, in addition to teaching English to students in grades 7 through 12, is also the school librarian.

"You look for the Mt. Everest volume and I'll look for . . . where are the M's?"

Books in hand, teacher and student return to the table. Katherine glances at her watch, scans the room, and says to Michael, "Get a clean sheet of paper."

Dutifully, Michael flips over the top sheet of the legal pad before him and folds it under.

Katherine opens the encyclopedia. "Look under 'Mountaineering.'" Resting the base of the binding against the table, she tilts the book up so Michael can see it. Turning the pages she continues to talk, "You want some information on the people who climb mountains. And you're" — here the long, manicured forefinger moves gracefully in Michael's general direction — "talking about Mt. Everest."

She stops turning and glances over a page. "So. . . . down here we find . . ." — she begins to read aloud — "'Between 1921 and 1953, eleven expeditions were mounted.'" She lays the book flat on the table and turns her head to the boy.

"So, don't just jump into Hillary." She pulls a piece of paper to her. "What you need to do . . ." — she begins to write, still holding the book open with her free hand — "this part we'll call right now 'A History of Mountaineering'. . . . "

Picking up some unauthorized activity on her radar, Katherine, as she writes, raises her voice, "Elvira, don't bother Anna." The two girls at the table near the front of the room bend their heads over their work.

As Katherine writes, she talks to Michael. "Never copy word for word. So I'll just put down the information — 'Between 1921 and 1958, eleven expeditions. . . .'" Pointing to the encyclopedia open before her, she continues, "Now, you're going to take this same information and put it in your own words. Then, you want to read a little bit more" — here, she stops and begins to read again. Momentarily, she lifts her head and says, "We find out that it wasn't until 1924 that they even reached 24,000 feet. Then, in the 1940s, they didn't reach the top but they almost reached it."

Again, she tilts the book so that Michael can read along with her. "They got to within 1500 feet of the summit." Laying the book flat, she turns to Michael. "That might not seem like a lot but how far is it from the river up to the top of Graveyard Hill?" She pauses, waiting several seconds for Michael to think. Michael shrugs uncomfortably under her stare.

Looking around the room, Katherine asks, "Does anyone have any idea how high the altitude is from the river up to the top of Graveyard Hill?"

A quiet voice calls out, "Three hundred."

Turning back to Michael, Katherine continues, "So imagine if you had to climb five times the height of the river to the bluff."

Tilting the book up again, she asks, "And then what happened to them?" Michael doesn't look up. After waiting for a response, Katherine answers her own question, "They disappeared."

She pulls the paper over to her again and begins to write. "So, it would be interesting to your readers to include something like this — 'Some killed on mountain.'" She looks at Michael again. "Just like . . . what was the Japanese fellow's name who tried to go up alone last year — Namamuri?

Every now and then someone falls into a crevasse. Maybe a thousand years from now someone will be climbing the mountain, look into a crevasse and say, 'Ugh, look at this body here.'"

Despite the gruesome appeal such an image might hold for many 15-year-olds, Michael appears unimpressed.

Katherine is reading from the encyclopedia again. After half a minute, she lowers the book, and begins writing, "Then you can give an example — 'In 1949 . . . almost reaches top . . . and disappeared'. . . . And then you would want to write something like . . ." — she continues to write — "'It wasn't until 1953 that Hillary was successful.'"

She stops and looks at Michael, "What's a Sherpa?"

His eyes fixed on the table, Michael shuffles papers and squirms. Katherine waits and then answers: "The man that reached the top was a native from the area and the group of people he belonged to was the Sherpas."

She stops writing, lays down her pen. "There were some women who attempted to climb Everest too. So let's see if we can find that book." Katherine gets up and goes back to the library shelves at the back of the room. She returns with a book, scans the room, sits back down, and shows Michael the title page.

"It's called *On Top of the World* and it's only about women mountain climbers." She opens the back cover. "Let's see if it has an index. . . . O.K., let's see if we can find 'Mt. McKinley.'" She glances down the page. "Well, they don't have McKinley. So this came out before women climbed McKinley. When was this published?" She turns once more to the title page. Michael looks on. "O.K., here it says '1976.' That's too early to include the McKinley women's climb. All right, see if any women have tried climbing mountains in the Himalayas . . ." — Katherine flips back to the index — "nothing. . . . So you could write 'As . . . of . . . 1976, no . . . women . . . had . . . been . . . successful. . . .' Now, let's see if you can find the 1982 or 1983 Almanac."

Katherine leans back against the chair, pushes her glasses up, looks around the room. Michael goes to the shelves and returns with the Almanac.

Opening the book, Katherine begins, "Now this has a table of contents in the front and it also has an index at the back." She shows Michael each section. "It's easiest sometimes to look in the index under 'Mountains' . . . O.K. . . . as you see, it has 'Highest mountains' but it doesn't have anything under 'Mountaineering.' So I'd probably have to look under something else to find it." Katherine flips through the index, glances at her watch, seems to realize that the task could eat up more time than remains, and gives up.

As she stands, she says to Michael, "But I'll try to see if I have something more — to find out what was the first year that women made it to the top of Everest."

She looks around at the other students, all of whom have been working on their own research papers while Katherine has been with Michael.

She points to a boy sitting near me. "You're O.K. on your paper." And then to the girl in front of him — "And you're O.K. on yours." These are statements of fact. Katherine is letting her students know that she knows what's going on with each of them.

She takes a final inventory of the other students and says, "If I didn't get to you today, I will tomorrow. I think you're all on track now." With that, the bell rings. School is out.

Macbeth Relevant in Interior Alaska

"Now, I've known this one's mother since she wasn't much bigger than this," Katherine says as she smiles at the infant in her arms. We are back at Katherine's house. The baby she is holding, but a few weeks old, is searching myopically for the source of the sounds he hears. He fixes on the light reflecting off Katherine's glasses.

I watch the way Katherine handles and speaks to the child. She does both with care and affection. At the same time, she doesn't talk baby talk and she plays with him — offering him a finger to grip, teasing him with the reflection off her glasses, talking to him — rather than merely cuddling him. She challenges more than she comforts or nurtures. I am struck by how her interactions with the infant parallel those with her students.

Katherine talks about the baby's mother who is visiting the dentist. The Indian Health Service dentist comes to the village twice each year. Katherine frequently babysits for the children of her former students. From the way she handles the child and her ability to focus her attention, simultaneously, on our discussion and on the child, I'm aware I am in the presence of a veteran child-care provider.

I'm still trying to understand Katherine's insistence on high standards and her ability to work with students so that they meet her standards. Besides the research paper, Katherine is also known for teaching Shakespeare to Athabaskan Indian children. While Mortimer Adler would approve enthusiastically, others, including many educators in Alaska, question the relevancy of the Bard to Alaska Natives.

"Relevant? Well, let's take *Julius Caesar* because that is a favorite of the students. What is it about?" Behind the glasses, her eyes are hard. My question has hit a nerve. She speaks slowly to insure, apparently, that I understand her.

I wait, hoping that she doesn't really expect me to answer, wondering what to say if she repeats the question.

To my relief, she answers her own question: "Assassination. Assassination never seems to go out of style. It's something that is going on all the time. The students can relate to it," she says, giving the baby another big smile and a shake of the head so that the light reflecting off her lens flashes across the child's face. Arms waving frantically, his eyes widen, and, too slowly, move to follow the streak of light.

"Then another favorite is *Macbeth*. They find that very exciting. Besides all the murders, there's the tension of not knowing whether he's going to get away with it. These aren't actions or themes that belong to any time or culture."

I asked her how the students handled Shakespeare's language.

"They don't read too well on their own and I don't expect them to. We do some of it orally together. We put some of it on tape as we read along. And I do a helluva lot of the reading orally as they follow along. Sometimes I'll call on a student and have them read a part while I read another part. We manage. They handle it."

I asked her what she would say to those who question the value of Shakespeare to someone who is going to lead a subsistence lifestyle.

"Well, that's part of that same attitude that I found at the school when I came here — 'These poor dumb souls can only learn so much.'" Behind her glasses, Katherine's eyes have hardened again. "Isn't that what we're saying when we say that Shakespeare isn't relevant to these students? The themes — assassination, murder, greed, love — are universally relevant. The poetry is as good as any in the language — or in any language for that matter. How is it not relevant? There were even subsistence hunters at the time of Shakespeare. I'd guess that they liked his plays just like everyone else."

"And, you know, not all subsistence people are the same. There are two kinds. There are the kind who go out only when the firewood is all gone or if there is no meat in the house. And then there are the ones who plan and prepare. Those are the hard workers. Students from these subsistence families who have seen this kind of hard work can stick to something, whether it is Shakespeare or a career plan. It's not a question of whether we should teach Shakespeare or not. It is the student. Some come from families where there are role models of hard work. They don't give up when something is difficult or the unexpected happens."

Katherine shifts the baby to her other arm, nuzzling his neck in the process. "I think it's good to let the kids know that all will not go smoothly. I tell them I was no brain in college. I said I had a couple of F's myself. I hated math. I flunked college algebra the first time and had to take it over."

Katherine laughs, "And wouldn't you know, when I returned to college twenty-five years later, they told me I needed math credits to finish. I went into trigonometry and flunked it the first time. I changed advisors and found out that I could substitute a science course. Science I liked.

"What they need is role models. They have them among the subsistence people. And they have them among the college-educated folks who've gotten their degrees and returned to teach here. Now they need some doctors, executives, and lawyers. My students can do it — just like they can read Shakespeare and take responsibility for their own activities — but they need some role models."

We are interrupted by a knock at the door. A young woman in her late teens comes in. She is introduced as the infant's mother. She sits down with us and has a cup of coffee. Katherine and she talk about the dentist, the baby, the young woman's mother (who is ill and hospitalized in Fairbanks). The tone of the conversation is less formal, more equalitarian than that of her talks with students at the school. She does not, however, totally relinquish the maternal tone. An undercurrent throughout the conversation is Katherine's expectations of her former student. Now, those expectations are for her roles as mother, wife, and community member.

I took my leave of Katherine and her guests. Walking back to the house where I was staying, I wondered then, as I do now, how much of Katherine's effectiveness can be traced to particular teaching practices — her management skills, her skill in giving feedback to students, her questioning strategies, and so on. More critical to her success were other factors, some of which receive scant attention in studies of teaching effectiveness — her commitment to enabling students to take responsibility for themselves and their community; her love of good literature and language and her understanding of the universal and timeless themes in literature; her repertoire of stories and examples that bridge between her students' background and literary texts and themes; her understanding, acquired largely outside of schools, of young people, their ways of learning and understanding, their interests, their capacity for growth, and their problems; and her expert knowledge of the school curriculum, particularly of materials and programs in literature and writing.

Her knowledge and commitments are expressed in a variety of ways. She is a master of the tutorial writing conference. She leads her students step-by-step through the process of developing a central idea, outlining, identifying and using sources of information, taking notes, producing a draft, revising, and polishing a finished product.

Her students write a great deal — not merely the research paper but worksheets, journals, learning folders, poetry, stories, and so on. She responds thoughtfully to these efforts. Using the computers in her classroom, her students prepare their writings for publication — primarily through the student newspaper.

In whole group reading activities, she constantly prods students to make meaning from what they read. She uses worksheets, discussions, and, with students who have particular problems, intensive tutorial conferences. She repeatedly raises critical comprehension questions: Why did the character do this? How does this event relate to others? What are the causes and consequences of this behavior or event? What is the conflict? What's the point? Whenever possible, Katherine uses local subject matter or examples. The annual Culture Week held at the school is the focus of several writing projects. The Raven stories are subject matter for reading activities. As the village has been her home for as long as it has been that of her students, local references naturally dominate her conversations.

At the same time, she violates rules derived from research on teaching Native American children.

Breaking the Rules and Getting Away with It

In the classroom, Katherine does not hesitate to "spotlight" students, particularly if they aren't doing their work. She'll hand out some ear-burning reprimands in class if she thinks the student and the situation demand it. Her intention is not to embarrass or humiliate; rather, she responds spontaneously to behaviors that interfere with the understandings and knowledge she feels students must have.

She doesn't hesitate to let students know that their failure to complete work or complete it to her satisfaction angers her. Katherine gives whatever she does in the classroom her full effort and attention. She expects — and demands — the same from her students. When she doesn't get it, she let's students know.

Katherine occasionally talks at her students — lectures to them. Most pundits consider this culturally inappropriate. Students going on for any kind of post-secondary training will, Katherine contends, be listening to lectures and will be expected to learn from them. Part of her job, she feels, is to get them ready for such experiences.

So, why, we may well ask, is she widely recognized — by colleagues, parents, students, and administrators — as one of the most effective teachers in rural Alaska? Why is it that her students hold her in such esteem and, when other images of high school have faded, remember her class, her mannerisms, her words? Katherine's success owes a great deal, it seems, to the time she has spent in the village. Villagers can see that she has voted with her feet. Her commitment to the children and the community has been manifest for years.

Mere longevity as a teacher does not, however, explain her success. Katherine shares with the community a respect for education and, in particular, for the formal education children receive in school. In many ways, Katherine represents the very best that the institution can offer: A model of the life of the mind and an advocate of the conviction that people who can think for themselves, who can make informed decisions, are the greatest promise for the future. For Katherine, that faith transcends cultural and racial differences. The ability to read and comprehend, to communicate one's thoughts and experiences, to find and apply information, and to assess ideas thoughtfully and critically are, for Katherine, knowledge and skills essential in all walks of life.

Her upbringing and experience have taught her that such knowledge and skills come only through sustained effort. We learn to write by writing and rewriting and, if necessary, rewriting again with the critical feedback of others. We learn to read by reading good literature and checking our understanding against the written word and the understandings of others to see if we've read carefully. Hard work, in turn, demands discipline. Discipline is necessary whether one is gathering firewood before the wood freezes or laboring to understand the "Queen Mab" speech in *Romeo and Juliet*. Discipline doesn't come naturally; we see it modeled and we learn it. Katherine's job, as she sees it, includes modeling and teaching such discipline.

Essential to a full, contributing life is the satisfaction that comes, according to Katherine, from exploring the avenues open to you even if, ultimately, you decide that there is no place like home.

Spending time with Katherine is refreshing. She feels no need to justify what she does or believes. In class, she responds to students like an insistent and demanding mother. At the same time, she is always the teacher who expects her students to master concrete skills as well as critical and creative thinking and who develops activities to ensure that her students succeed.

Finally, Katherine, in her bearing and self-presentation, models the self-respect, critical posture, and confidence that she attempts to develop in her students. These are the goals, rather than the intermediate ones of competent communication, that fuel her classroom intensity and her professional success.

In the essay from which I have quoted above, Katherine's former student seems to have had her high school English teacher in mind when she wrote, "An effective teacher is someone that you appreciate more and more the older you get."

EVAN

Starting the Day at Sailor Point School

At 8:45, Sandy parks her Honda three-wheeler beside the wooden steps that lead up to the blue school building. To the south, above the mountains, the clouds are low and heavy, turgid with rain. On the distant horizon to the north they meld into the slate-grey sea. She dismounts, pulls off her knit gloves, and climbs the steps just as another three-wheeler pulls into the school yard. The rider is Sandy's mom who is the school cook.

Beneath Sandy's Nikes the wooden floors groan as she walks toward the classroom wing of the building. From the other wing wafts the lingering aroma of honey-cured bacon. This is the teacherage. Evan, the teacher, has eaten an early breakfast and is working in the classroom. Just outside the classroom Sandy removes her lightweight quilted black nylon jacket. Although the twenty knot wind and the 38 degree temperature call for heavier gear, fashion dictates — even in a small fishing village of fifty souls.

Sandy is, indeed, the very form of fashion — designer jeans, smart top, swept-back haircut. She carries herself as though nothing short of a papal visit would cause her to miss a stride. This says nothing of her character but rather her style, a style that varies little in high schools from the Aleutians to the Keys.

In contrast to Sandy's up-to-date style, the room she now enters is from another era. In the wall opposite the door are a half a dozen old-fashioned double sash windows. Beyond the windows, a brown expanse of tundra runs to the horizon. The color of the indoor/outdoor carpet matches that of the tundra. On the dingy walls, posters and bulletin boards are bursts of bright colors — greens, reds, blues. Bookcases along the walls hold boxes of educational materials . . . Read-Along Listening Library . . . Bell & Howell Language Master System . . . Eye Gate Media Instructional Materials . . . Databank System - Inquiring about Cultures . . . Target Spelling Kit I . . . Specific Skill Series.

Attached to the walls are four green chalkboards. Painted on three of the boards are the alternating broken and unbroken lines that generations of school children have sweated to fill with three letter words. A cursive alphabet is thumbtacked above the greenboard at the front of the room. Two rows of fluorescent lights span the ceiling.

Sandy smiles, releasing for a moment her stylish insouciance, and nods at Evan. The young man returns the smile from beneath a droopy black mustache.

"Morning, Evan."

"Morning, Sandy."

Evan lowers his head towards the table on which are spread open four Ginn Reading Series workbooks, each for a different level. He flips through each workbook, writing page numbers into a large spiral lesson plan notebook.

Metal frame glasses perch atop a nose large enough to compete with his thick mustache to dominate his face. His black hair is slicked down and, at the nap of his neck, turns tail like a 1950's D.A. gone to seed. His thick body — powerful and solid like the football player he was — is clothed in jeans and a jersey. On his feet are crepe-soled tan loafers, softened by wear. In good repair, his clothes are faded from frequent washing. Evan is not a slave to fashion.

Sandy sits down at her desk — a modular unit of veneer and stainless steel. On the second shelf, just visible around her small frame, are pens, pencils, a ruler and several books in a stack. To her right, at knee-height, another shelf holds a dozen or so manila folders. The total effect of the desk is of neatness comfortably short of neurosis.

Sandy takes out one of the folders. Inside are notebook paper covered with handwriting, mimeographed worksheets, and pages carefully torn from workbooks. She pulls out a page partially completed, puts the folder back in its place, and bends to her work.

Another girl, dark, quiet, and jeaned like Sandy, enters the room, murmurs a greeting to Evan, who looks up and returns the greeting, before she takes her seat. Within a minute, a small boy comes in and calls out loudly, "Hi, Evan."

Evan looks up from the textbook before him and smiles broadly. "Morning, Sean." Still smiling he watches the boy go to his desk, lift up the top, take out a pack of manila-colored cards, and sit down.

An older boy, his face and hands badly scarred, walks by Evan's table.

"Hi, Hitler."

Evan shifts his gaze to the older boy, returns the greeting in a very soft voice, and lowers his eyes to the book before him.

The older boy takes his seat, looks around, and reaches inside his desk for a book.

Sean, the younger boy, flips the packet of cards onto the older boy's desk and then follows the cards himself. He kneels in front of the desk as the older boy removes the rubber band, shuffles the cards, and begins to hold up the cards for Sean to see. "Six plus two equals . . . eight. Four plus three equals . . . seven. . . ."

Sandy and Margaret, the older girls, are talking quietly at the back of the room. A small girl, between Sean and Sandy in size, appears in the doorway. Leaning against the sill as she kicks off her boots, she calls out, "Hi, Evan."

Picking up her boots and putting them in a corner in the hallway, she disappears into the bathroom. A couple of minutes later she reappears, takes her seat, opens her desktop, and shuffles through a jumble of papers.

Two desks are still empty. Class starts officially in two minutes.

Exactly at 9:00, a girl about Sean's size, her long dark hair held tightly against her head by a hairband, comes into the room, smiling.

Pushing his lesson plan book aside, Evan looks up and smiles in return. "Morning, Heather."

In a fetching display of dimples and long lashes, the little girl returns the smile and the greeting. She takes her seat, turns and graces everyone with a dazzling smile, rummages about in her desk, and produces a pack of cards like Sean's. Turning her chair around, she waits for Sandy who is looking at some snapshots that Margaret has brought.

Evan gazes abstractly at the six students, his fingertips together.

With an air of drama, a large fair-haired girl rushes through the doorway. She throws herself into her desk against the wall.

"You're late, Liz." Margaret doesn't look up as she speaks.

"I know." Liz busies herself looking for a book in a tray under her desk. Her movements, like her voice, are charged with irritation. Her sense of drama and self-importance contrasts sharply with the silence and self-effacement of her classmates.

Evan waits, ignoring Liz's behavior. He stands up and walks over to the bulletin board at the front of the room. Pointing to a handmade calendar, he asks, "Sean, what day is it?"

"Friday."

"What month are we in?"

"March."

"How many days in a year?"

"Uuhh. . . ." Sean fiddles with the stack of flashcards in his hand, "three hundred and sixty-five."

"How many months in the year?"

"Twelve."

"Name 'em."

"Januaryfebruarymarchaprilmayjunejulyaugustseptemberoctobenovemberdecember."

Meanwhile, the older students are getting out books and paper. Harold wanders over to Sandy, quietly asks for a pencil, and returns to his seat.

"Heather, what day is it?"

"Friday."

Evan repeats the same litany with Heather who, though in the first grade, is Sean's equal in this as in other skill areas. Her performance is offhand as though Evan had asked her what she had for breakfast. As she finishes, Evan strolls, hands in pockets, to the back of the room. As he does so, the students rise and stand by their desks, their right arms across their chests, their hands over their hearts, their eyes on the flag at the front of the room.

The pledge is clear, unselfconscious, leisurely. The cadence is even and easy. Sean truncates "indivisible" to the more manageable "invisible."

Evan returns to the front of the room. As he passes Sean, he says, "You're back there" — gesturing toward a small table on which sits a Dukane audio-visual unit.

Sean sits down at the table, switches on the power, puts on earphones and watches as a clock with a human face, arms, and legs appears on the screen. The smiling clock points to a large "5 + 0 = ?" Sean says, "Five," and pushes a button which brings a new problem onto the screen accompanied by the smiling clock in a new position.

Margaret, Sandy, and Harold have their *Mathematics and Us* text open and are working on problems involving fractions. Elizabeth has before her a *Basic Algebra* text and is solving problems using positive and negative numbers.

Brenda is laboring over row after mimeographed row of single-digit multiplication problems. Beside her, Heather is at work on a similar array of single-digit addition.

By the time Evan sits back down at his desk, every student in the room is at work. Other than his instruction to Sean, Evan has said nothing. About fifteen seconds have elapsed since the pledge.

In Evan's class, students always know what they are supposed to be doing. If it's 10:00, then it's Spelling and Word List -17 and we are writing sentences using the new words and our test is Friday.

With only seven students, bells are not necessary. They themselves monitor the time. When it's time for Spelling, each student, independently and without discussion, puts away his math book and takes out the spelling workbook.

From her desk near the back of the room, Elizabeth calls out, "Is minus 2 plus minus 2 equal to minus 4?"

Evan looks up and nods.

Sandy stands, picks up her book, walks to the front of the room, and sits opposite Evan.

"How you do number two?"

Evan sets aside the book before him, selects the *Mathematics Around Us* text from the book trolley beside him, and flips through the pages. Finding the page that Sandy is on, he reads quietly, "Number 2 . . . 2/3 plus 7/8 . . . did you find your common denominator?"

"—."

"24."

"Yeah."

Sandy works the problem as Evan watches. Sean now comes up and stands by Evan, momentarily leaning his head against his teacher's shoulder while he waits. Evan takes the worksheet from his hand, glances at it, and then gestures toward a wire basket which, by day's end, will be filled with notebook paper and worksheets.

This classroom is like a well-oiled machine. To some educators, such a classroom is the very antithesis of "good" education. The students are reactive rather than proactive; teaching is directive rather than indirective; the teacher is authoritarian rather than democratic.

To a casual observer, the classroom looks dull and boring. Students are not engaged in inquiry learning; the curriculum is dictated largely by the textbooks; and students spend more than half the day on seatwork.

During the rest of the day, the class as a group does science, social studies, or art. Yet, even in the afternoons, the teacher dictates the activities.

So how is it that the teacher who engineers this classroom could be nominated by parents, colleagues, and supervisors as an "effective" teacher?

One Man's Sense of Responsibility

Possibly the man himself by sheer force of personality motivates students to learn. Yet Evan is quiet to the point of dullness, unassuming, self-effacing. Nothing better illustrates his character and attitude than a story reported in the news the year before my visit.

A local boy, high on alcohol and drugs, went berserk. He killed three people and wounded three others, including Evan who picked up a shotgun pellet while trying to help one of the wounded. To hear Evan tell the story, you would think he'd merely given someone a ride to the plane.

One spring afternoon as we sat in the teacherage kitchen, Evan told me the story in his flat, nasal accent.

"Matthew came from a broken home. There were three boys and I think they all had different fathers. He was the middle child. He was pretty much on his own most of the time and did not get along with his mother. And I guess he did not really like her boyfriend. I don't know if it's true or not but some people say that Matthew thought the boyfriend was just trying to use the mother to get her fishing permit.

"Anyway, I had him as a seventh grader and he was likeable and was not much of a problem in school. Then he went away to Port Heiden where he has friends and relatives. I think that's where his dad was from.

"This past summer, when he was back here for fishing, I guess he was just not getting along with his mom's boyfriend. He got into a drinking party with some friends and was doing drugs, I guess, at the same time.

"He liked this girl that his buddy also liked and before this party he must have given this boy a black eye over this girl. Then, they must have had another fight and, after drinking for a while, he decided to go home and get a gun and come back and kill his buddy.

"He went after this guy, Clark, and the girl — her name is Katya — and caught up with them at the airfield. They were on a Honda three-wheeler. Clark dropped her off at the airfield and told her to run on foot — thinking, hoping that Matthew would go after him. But Katya panicked. Instead of running, she froze where she was. Matthew came right up to her and just fired five shots into her. I think it was a .357 he used. Luckily, they hit the neck and flesh and did not kill her — she lived but is paralyzed.

"He wounded Clark slightly with the shot gun and started riding back into town. On the way, he passed the guy he was fishing with who was also riding a Honda. Matthew fired at him but missed.

"And then he came around the school and that is when I first saw him with the shotgun. Just then someone came on the CB saying that Matthew was going around shooting people. Then I saw him head home where he was living with his mom. And it could not have been much longer than about five minutes later I heard Joe Tate — the boyfriend — come on the CB and say he had been shot and needed help.

"So I figured I would go down there and try and get him out because I was closest to the house. I had a truck so I figured I would give it a shot.

"I knew Matthew was there. But I didn't know exactly where he was. So, I headed down there in my truck and Joe was walking out over the hill. He had gotten out of the house and was evidently going after Matthew with his shotgun. I honked the horn and came between Joe and Matthew's house. And that is when I came across the other two bodies — the little brother and the family friend.

"So I managed to get those two into the truck. They were already gone. I picked them up and put them in the back of the truck and I got

Joe into the front seat. That is when Matthew must have come out of the house, or somewhere. I did not even see him or hear him.

"He took a shot at me, I guess. I heard the shot and then I felt something hit my butt. It must have been a pellet. I did not turn around to see where he was. I was done with what I went down there for. I jumped in the truck and went back up and took Joe up to the health clinic.

"I managed to get Joe into the clinic and tried to clean him up a little bit. He had a pretty big hole in the side of his neck, though. I was afraid he was going to bleed to death so I tried to get him out of town as fast as I could. We managed to get him on a plane and he's all right now.

"I guess Matthew went on down to his mom's cabin on the beach and just sort of held up there until the troopers flew in and got him out."

I asked him what people in the village said to him afterwards.

"Most people do not say anything. It is not necessary, you see, from their perspective. They will just remember it."

Typically, Evan views his actions as little more than fulfilling his responsibility. Clearly, his notion of what constitutes his responsibility goes well beyond the classroom. His working class upbringing taught him that there is no excuse for not getting the job done — whether the job be teaching fractions or evacuating the wounded under fire. And getting the job done deserves no special recognition.

After I had spent several days in his classroom and several evenings interviewing him, Evan confided, "There are teachers around that you hear about that are just doing an outstanding job. That's why to single me out here. . . . I kinda feel a little embarrassed at times." He laughs softly. "Cause I don't think I'm doing anything outstanding. If I was to evaluate myself, I'm just doing what needs to be done. I do things the way I was taught."

Adapting Teaching to the Context of Sailor Point

Evan does not offer excuses for his students' failure to learn a skill or to score near national norms on standardized tests. His assumption is that all students can learn what he has to teach. Some may take longer than others but they all can master the fundamental academic skills needed to succeed in high school.

"I take each student one at a time and decide what things I want that student to learn in math, reading, spelling, history, and general science. I write my objectives down, very specifically, like 'The student will learn how to add two and three digit numbers with and without carrying, to 80 percent accuracy.' I do that for every student.

"If I were sitting in a classroom in Franklin, Massachusetts, my hometown, I would probably be doing the same thing. In my mind or on a piece of paper, I would have all these things written down somewhere so that I know that this kid is going to be learning this before the year is over. In this respect, there's not much difference between rural Alaska and the Lower 48. Where you get a difference is in how you go about doing it."

During our interviews over the course of a week, Evan identified for me some of the differences in the "how." Most had to do with norms governing personal interactions.

"I learned pretty soon after coming here that you don't raise your voice. That really unnerves people. They look at you like you're crazy.

"Another thing that's different is that they communicate a lot in very subtle ways. They may not talk a lot but they can say a lot with their bodies. Like today in class. Margaret wouldn't look at me during lunch. In the afternoon, she came up to my table for something. So I asked her about it. She said that she had wanted to asked me something this morning but that I ignored her. I didn't really. But that's what she thought.

"When I first came, I don't think I picked up on those kinds of signals. So I had a harder time dealing with students. Now I know what to watch for — especially like their body posture.

"Another thing is just not staring at people. The kids get upset when you stare at them. Heather, my little first grader, gets yelled at by the other kids 'cause she has this habit of staring at you. "There are other little things like that to be aware of — not pointing your finger at people. And one of the things I found out in the classroom is that they don't like to be lectured to. That's why I avoid it in my teaching. After you talk at them for a while they'll just tune out. I've tried in the afternoons, for social studies or science. It just does not work."

While insisting that his students master reading, writing, and computational skills, Evan expresses a lot of ambivalence about college as an expectation for his students. "What's the role of the teacher? The teacher is there to prepare the student for real life — to go out into the world and accomplish something. But here in Alaska, I do not see anything wrong with someone who wants to stay in their village for the rest of their life.

"Of these kids here, I only see one going on to college. The rest are going to end up living life in Sailor Point the way it is — fishing in the summers, raising their families, just living the village lifestyle.

"I do not know what is out there in Anchorage or Seattle or anywhere else for that matter that would make their lives that much happier. Everybody says there's no place like home and that is probably more relevant in Alaska than any place else because you've got very close family ties in these villages.

"There are two girls here who are doing correspondence study. They tried to go to Port Heiden and then to Naknek for high school. They were just homesick all the time. So they finally said, 'Well, we're going to quit school.' We managed to get them into correspondence study. They have no desire whatsoever to leave their parents right now. I do not think they will ever want to leave here. Sure, they might try Outside for a year or so. But I think they are going to end up right back in Sailor Point. And I do not think that that is at all bad. I guess the argument is that they do not realize what is out there in the Outside world. Ya, that's true. But, I do not think that there is all that much out there that is going to change their lives.

"So, you can get into a real conflict with yourself. Right now I am preparing them in basic academic skills. When they get into high school, the teacher is not going to be frustrated and wonder what I was doing with them for the previous eight years. But I do not think I would be a very good high school teacher. I would have a hard time convincing them to go out there and go to college and become a nurse or a doctor or a lawyer or whatever.

"If a high school student asked me for information, fine. If the student wants to go to college, I will encourage him as much as I can. But if a student does not want to leave home, that is perfectly fine with me."

At this point, Evan laughed and added, "I guess that's why I cannot understand why other teachers would think I was effective. I do not necessarily think we should challenge these kids to leave their villages."

As Evan talked, I thought about "high expectations." The literature on effective teaching and schools stresses the critical importance of communicating such expectations to students. Implicitly, preparation for college is generally regarded as standard for expectations.

What do high expectations look like in Sailor Point? Here, high school students who work on fishing boats in the summer may earn $15,000, $20,000, even $30,000. Women traditionally marry young and devote themselves to raising their children. The expectations of people in the village differ radically from those educators considered ideal.

What, then, are appropriate expectations in Sailor Point?

From Franklin, Massachusetts, to the Alaska Peninsula

Evan's training suited both his attitude toward teaching and the situation he would find in Sailor Point. At Bridgewater State College, in eastern Massachusetts, he trained to become a Special Education teacher. Unlike other students who enter this field, Evan chose Special Education for typically pragmatic reasons. Before beginning his college education, he discussed the job market with his sister who was then a student at Bridgewater State.

"She told me the field in which there was greatest demand was Special Education. On top of that, very few guys were training for Special Ed — in fact, there was only one in her class. So I thought that would be my best chance for getting a job right out of college."

To enter college, Evan had given up a pretty good job. "My relatives thought . . . well, not that I was crazy but they didn't agree with my decision to go to college. I was working as a warehouseman, making union wages, with a chance to move up to foreman. They said, 'You are going to give up four years of working, see. You're losing all that money.' Like I said, that teamsters job was a good-paying job."

Unlike many college students, Evan took some time in deciding that he wanted to go to college at all. The experience of working at the kind of manual jobs that his father had always held convinced him.

"Right after high school, I worked in a filling station for about two years. Then I got a job at the factory where my mother and my brother worked. I just had a bench job — sitting at a bench for 8 hours a day soldering one piece and testing it. I lasted at that job for about three months and then I just couldn't stand it any more.

"After that, I went to work with my dad — at a tampon factory. My dad never graduated from high school. He dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He's always worked his butt off all his life. So he was working in this sweatshop where they made things like tampons out of cotton fiber. My dad liked it because it was hard physical labor. And he liked it because — I guess, again see, I'm like that too — once you finished the two tubs of cotton fiber, you're done. And he was at the point where he could do it in three or four hours. He had the rest of the time off but he couldn't leave the plant. He could sleep, play cards, read the paper, but he couldn't just wander off.

"So when he showed me the job, I thought, 'O.K., this is my first real man-sized job.' He just did it and I worked side-by-side with him. You had to get into these vats of cotton fiber that must have been ten feet in diameter and ten feet deep. You had to get a ladder to get out once the cotton was gone.

"You had this moveable metal hose that sucked up these wet cotton fibers. But they were so wet, you had to pull them loose so the hose could suck them up.

"We wore shorts and sneakers and a T-shirt. At first I used gloves but then it was just easier to use your hands 'cause you could get a better grip.

"You'd just sit right on the cotton and get into a good position where you could rip it off and it would fall right into the suction.

"It was just hard work, hellaciously hard work . . . and, you know, I said 'Well, this is a job' — so I did it. It was back-breaking — my back was sore and my hands were raw.

"Then, I was taking a break in the employees' lounge after my first tub one night — I had the evening shift — I was eating and there were all these people around me. They weren't overly friendly, I guess 'cause they were non-English speakers — Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Portuguese. They were there for the money — they didn't care how hard the work was. They were hard-working people all their lives so they thought this was great — $3.00 an hour, I think.

"Then it dawned on me I couldn't speak with these people. And I said 'No' — again, I was looking long-term — 'I don't think I want to spend ten years here like my dad.' He paid the price of being a high school dropout. But to him it was just a job — just doing your work and getting paid so he could pay his bills and raise a family. Being single, I didn't care about those things.

"I just said to myself, 'There's another way to make a living than this. I also felt that having been educated in college-prep courses I could do better. I didn't have to settle for this like my dad did."

Evan quit the tampon business to join several of his high school buddies who were working at a Delmonte's warehouse. Evan now had new motivation for working: to save money for college. In the evenings, he began taking courses at a nearby community college.

After a year at the warehouse, he entered Bridgewater State College. "I was just starting out when people I knew from high school were graduating. That kind of threw me a little bit. But I said to myself, 'There's nothing you can do about that. It took you three years to make up your mind about what you are going to do.' Others kids that I had graduated with and who had gone right off to college had ended up dropping out because they really didn't know what they wanted to do."

Evan now feels that his training at Bridgewater contributed significantly to whatever success he has enjoyed as a teacher.

"Right from the beginning, the professors in education inspired us. They told us we'd be able to step straight from their classes into Special Ed work. They continually stressed that we would be prepared when we graduated. And they were right. They also warned us that if we were going into Special Ed for the money, we wouldn't make it. They were right about that too, I think."

The Special Ed classes at Bridgewater emphasized a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to teaching. "For our course work we did a lot of informal inventories. Mine was in math. I did scope and sequence for the first through the eighth grade. I had to make up a test for each skill — like for place value, computations with fractions, and so on."

Training in diagnostics also included work-ups of specific cases. "We learned to administer a number of instruments — Key Math, Peabody, Brigance — and how to score and interpret the results. Then we worked up profiles of students' strengths and weaknesses. We learned to get input from the students' classroom teachers. Then we wrote up IEPs — Individualized Educational Plans — for each student."

During his last semester at Bridgewater, Evan responded to an job announcement for an itinerant Special Education teacher position for the Lake and Peninsula School District in western Alaska. He was hired to travel to the eight schools in the southern portion of the district to deliver Special Educational services. With an average enrollment of 20 students, these schools are too small to justify a full-time Special Education position. So Evan was to spend a few days per month at each site working with the Special Education students and with the teachers.

As so often happens in rural Alaska, however, the best laid central office plans went awry. Arriving at the district office in King Salmon, Evan learned he should have been in Anchorage for a Special Education meeting. Not knowing what to do with him, the Superintendent seized the chance to shore up a personnel problem. He dispatched Evan to Chignik Lagoon where the community had asked that the school be opened for the first two months of the school year. Originally, the district had not intended to open the school because all the residents thought they would be leaving after the fishing season ended.

"The Superintendent asked me if I would go down there to get things started. I said 'Sure.' I didn't know what was going on.

"So I flew down by myself, not knowing any better. I found the keys and I opened up the school. I found a lot of 1940s materials — you know, 'See Dick and Jane run.' I held class the next day. Fifteen kids showed up. They sat there staring at me. I stared back at them. Then, I just started remembering what I'd been taught in college. But they never taught me anything about generators. So I had to learn that on my own — or do without power at the school.

"I stayed at the Lagoon for a couple of months and then started travelling around to the different schools. That first year people would check me out. Like in Chignik Lake, this guy who sort of runs things asked me over to his house. When I got there, he put this water glass on the table in front of me and filled it with whiskey. I knew it was not polite to leave before you finished your drink. I understood he was testing me, seeing how I would react.

"Well, I managed to get it down. It took me a while — I was there a couple of hours. But I got it down. He did that to me a couple of more times. Then he stopped. I guess he decided I was O.K. We got along real well.

"And this is the same guy who had sort of pushed the previous teacher out. I didn't really blame him for that. This teacher had showed up in the village and his first day there, this friend of mine asked him about the vocational education course. And this teacher said he was going to teach the kids how an outboard motor worked — you know, like the theory of the motor.

"Well, my friend didn't say, 'No, don't do that.' People around here don't say things like that. He just said, 'Well, we have a lot of fishing boats around here and people need to know how to repair engines. They need practical knowledge.' But this teacher thought he knew better. So right away he was off on the wrong foot. You can understand why he was gone within a few weeks.

"I went back out to Chignik Lagoon that spring for another month and a half. Then, my second year, I travelled like I was supposed to."

During his travels over the three years he worked as an itinerant Special Education teacher, Evan got to know the people in Sailor Point. When the regular classroom teacher decided not to return for the following year, Evan asked to be allowed to replace him.

"Being the itinerant Special Ed teacher was real useful. I got to see all the teachers in action during those three years. I learned a lot from watching them — what to do and what not to do. I got to see a variety both of materials and techniques. Some of those I adopted when I came here.

"One teacher in particular had an effective system for managing the small, multi-grade classrooms typical of our district. She had these really elaborate lesson plans — they went on for pages. And she'd have a pile of materials ready for the kids when they arrived at school. I thought she actually overdid it but her reasoning was that, if the kids were always on task, they wouldn't bother the others. She always had a directed lesson going on with some group, always had two or three kids with her at her table. She wasn't like some teachers I've seen who have the assignments on the board and are just sitting at the table saying, 'All right, now let's get busy.'

"A lot of the materials in my classroom are ones that I saw in action — the 'Target' tape series, the SRA Comprehension tape series, the Specific Skills Series, time-drill sheets, the Edmark Reading Series — so travelling those three years helped me a lot in so far as seeing effective materials and techniques."

Lake and Peninsula School District, like other rural districts in the state, generously allows their teachers to order materials they need — within reason. While some educators bemoan the lack of standardization and the waste they see in such a policy, teachers appreciate it.

A Diagnostic-Prescriptive Approach

At the core of Evan's teaching is the diagnostic-prescriptive approach that he learned at Bridgewater and which he practiced as an itinerant Special Ed teacher. I asked him to describe how he thought through what and how to teach young Sean.

"When I got Sean, he was a kindergartner with a couple of years of preschool. He came in with some of the basic skills they teach in preschool but as far as reading or any academic skills go, there just wasn't anything there.

"So the first thing I did was to see if he could write his name. Just by watching him do it, I could see that he had no concept of lines or spacing. All I did then — which is what I do with most of my kindergartners — was to make up ditto masters with his name. I make up my own line and half lines and write his name in full on top of the ditto master. On the second and third lines, I write his name in dotted letters. At the bottom are a couple of blank lines where he can practice writing his name on his own.

"It took him a while to get the idea that you have to fill in the space — part of the letter goes in the top half and the rest goes in the bottom half. Certain letters go above the lines, others on the line. Some letters fill up all of the line. Some go below the line, others just in half the space. And so on. I took him through all of that. Eventually, with a lot of practice and direct instruction, he's now at the point where he can print — in fact, he's started writing in cursive. He can look at something he's written and realize if it's too close together.

"At the same time, I got him started on reading skills — letter discrimination. I would have him write a letter and identify it. We went through the whole alphabet that way, upper and lower case. Then we'd go back and look at the sound each letter made. And we used phonics books and a cassette tape series that I had for identifying letters from their sounds only.

"Next, we used pictures for identifying the beginning sounds of words. I used to have to find my own pictures but the itinerant reading teacher ordered the Peabody Articulation Cards for me. When I felt like he had gotten to the point that he could identify beginning sounds, we switched to ending sounds.

"It took a while before he could discriminate between the beginning and the ending. Often times, I'd ask him for the beginning sound and he'd give me the ending sound. Again, I did a lot of directive teaching and he did a lot of practice. I'd put a card with a picture on it up on the chalk tray and we'd identify the picture so he knew what it was. Then we'd just practice and practice and practice having him pick out the word or the picture I wanted."

I asked him how he knew when a student like Sean had sufficiently mastered a skill to move on.

"You never really know for sure. All these drills I do with the students are, in a way, tests. I get to the point in teaching a skill where I won't help him any more. I'll just sit back and direct the activity and not offer any help. If they are missing only one or even two out of 15 tries, they've pretty well got it mastered to the point where we can move on to another skill. So I don't keep the kind of detailed records like I used to for Special Ed where we had to document everything. But, in my mind, I know he's got the beginning and the ending sounds. Now it's time to move on to short vowels.

"We start off with the vowels. I teach just the letter 'a'. I associate one picture with the sound — like an apple with the short 'a' sound. Then, again I would get pictures, some of which had short 'a' sounds and some that did not. We'd work on the visual for a while. Then, I'd do oral drills — saying a word to see if he could identify the sound in the word. Usually it was in the middle of the word though occasionally it would be at the beginning — like 'axe' or 'ant'. When he could correctly identify, say, 9 or even 8 out of 10, I'd introduce the next vowel — 'e'. I'd drop the 'a' for a day or two until he could discriminate the short 'e' sound. Then, when he got to the point where he could discriminate the 'e' to my satisfaction, I'd put the 'a' and the 'e' together and we'd do simple chalkboard exercises, associating a particular sound with the its letter. When he got to where he could discriminate between the 'a' and the 'e', then we'd move on to the next letter. Once he got the short vowels mastered — which took a long time in his case — he practiced a lot. And you just have to have a lot of patience. Sometimes my patience was wearing thin because in my mind I felt he could do it. But then I'd realize that he was trying — and there was really nothing he could do about it. You just have to keep plugging away. I have film strips and cassettes that we use to give him extra practice — almost all of it was directed practice with me right there with him.

"Once he got past the short vowels, we moved through the long vowels the same way. When we got those down, we were able to blend words together. I said to him, 'Now you know all the short vowels, the long vowels, and the consonants — now it's easy. You just put them together.'

"It took him a while to understand that you always start reading from the left. I had to use the pointer or my finger. Even now, when he sees a new word that he's never seen before, he's almost afraid to read it. But I say, 'You know all the sounds — just put them together.'

"I want them to start off reading toward the second half of the kindergarten year so I use my Edmark Reading Program. It's a Special Ed or remedial program designed for nonreaders of any age. It is practically a fail-proof sight-word vocabulary program because it's so structured and repetitive that they can't fail, really, to learn the words. Simple words like 'the/a horse,' words that, once they learn them, they can put them together in sentences.

"He just took off with that program. We worked about a year and a half using the Edmark. At the same time, we continued to work with short vowels and blends, beginning, ending and consonant sounds. So when he became a second grader, I was able to drop him from the Edmark program. Though he hadn't quite finished it, I felt he had enough basic sight words and had experienced a fair bit of success in beginning to read. I put him into the Ginn series this year.

"I gave him a placement test and started him out at Level 2. And now, we're on Level 5. He's just reading at a 1st grade level now even though he's a second grader. But that doesn't worry me because I know I'll be here next year and I can just continue with Ginn."

A Spelling Lesson

Sean and Heather, the first grader, are sitting opposite Evan at his table. All have workbooks open on the table before them. Evan is leaning back in his chair.

"Let's go to number thirteen."

"Thirteen?"

"Heather's not ready yet, Sean."

Behind Heather and Sean, Margaret and Sandy are working together, their desks side by side. Liz, Harold and Brenda are also working on their reading workbooks at their individual desks. It's 10:50. The twenty minute morning recess is just over.

Heather, Sean, and Evan have on the page before them a crossword puzzle. The puzzle requires the student to figure out the word called for that has an 'ow' sound. Evan reads the description of the next word.

"It spells an 'ou' sound."

Sean reads, "It spells an 'ou' sound."

Looking up from the workbook before him Evan asks, "What other two letters can spell the 'ou' sound besides o - u?"

Sean answers immediately, "Sound!"

Evan repeats his question, "What other two letters have the 'ou' sound besides o - u? What are the other two letters that made the 'ou' sound that we studied this week?"

Sean ventures another reply: "House?. . . . Out?"

"You're not listening to what I'm saying." Neither Evan's voice, his face, nor his body betray the impatience that earlier he had confided is a major flaw in his teaching. "What other two letters spell the 'ou' sound? What other two letters —"

"O - W!" Sean beams at Evan, knowing that he's finally got it right.

"O - w spells the 'ou' sound," Evan confirms. Pointing to number thirteen in Heather's workbook, he adds, "Let's put that in there."

Sean studies the page before him, "Right here?"

"Number thirteen."

Sandy has joined Evan and the younger children at the table and is writing a paragraph in response to a question in her workbook. She interjects, "I'm on proofreading."

"O.K." Evan glances at her work.

"O - w?" Heather asks.

"That spells the 'ou' sound, doesn't it?" He waits while she fills in the blank in her workbook. "O.K., let's go to number fourteen." He reads, "'At this time. . . . I want you to do your math sheets right. . . ."

Sean exclaims, "NOW!"

"Now," Evan confirms his answer. "'At this time . . . . so let's find the word 'now' and put it in there."

"Now . . . now . . . now," Sean intones, trying to decide how to spell the word.

"You can probably spell 'now' anyway without even looking. How do you spell now?"

Heather responds, "N - o - w."

Sean writes in his workbook, looks up at Evan and pushes the book toward him, "Like that?"

"There it is." Evan rarely offers praise beyond an occasional "O.K." When I asked him about this later, he explained that people in the village just didn't do it. "People just don't say much about it. If you do something good, they know it. But they don't mention it — unless maybe they're a little high."

"All right the next one is number what?"

"Fifteen."

Heather is stumped on the first word, "Saa . . ."

After waiting a few seconds, Evan offers, "Same."

"Same sound as 13 Across."

"So we look at 13 Across. . . . 13 Across was 'ow'. . . . so what other two letters spell the 'ow' sound besides O - W?"

Sean replies quickly, "O - U!"

"O - U, right. So let's put that in there as number fifteen. . . ."

Much of the morning each day is passed in just this way: Evan working with groups of two or three students while the remaining four or five do seatwork either together, in pairs, or at the front table working quietly while Evan teaches. The amount of direct interaction between him and each of the students is very high. For example, during the week I spent in the classroom, Sean received four and a half hours of direct, interactive instruction. The reading lesson described above lasted 56 minutes — all of which was interactive.

In the afternoons, most instruction occurs in a group setting. The days I observed, Evan had the students doing various hands-on activities such as a drill using nail boards to practice following directions. Again, the emphasis of Evan's teaching is direct instruction.

This quantification of time spent on direct instruction says nothing about the quality of the teaching. Watching Evan teach, I had a sense of quiet intensity. Reinforcing this sense of intensity was the response of students to the man: They worked hard and yet were both comfortable and relaxed in his presence. When I tried to talk about Evan with the students, their shyness defeated me. But Evan conveyed the feeling that whether or not his students learned was of the utmost importance.

Concern about student learning and communicating that concern differs fundamentally from a concern for students' self-image. For teachers such as Evan, self-image follows naturally when students master academic skills. Knowing they can read, add fractions, name the parts of a flower, solve word problems, and so on gives students a sense of their own competence, their own power. Failure to master academic skills rather then the lack of effusive praise leads to low self-esteem.

"I don't really care if my students like me or not. Only that they try to do what I ask of them, whether they like it or not," Evan told me one evening as we talked about his goals for his students. Yet, this is a man who enjoys both touching and joking with his students. "A hand on a student's shoulder or a little tap on the head when you go to his desk to assist him is appropriate. But you have to respect those students who aren't receptive to physical contact."

Another technique Evan uses is short, intense one-on-one reviews. During math period one morning, when everyone was involved in seatwork, he called Brenda up to the chalkboard. The week before, he had shown her decimal point placement. Now, he had ten numbers on the board.

"O.K. Brenda, I want you to place your decimal point in that first number so it will read 56.16."

Brenda studies the four numbers - 5 6 1 6 - for a moment and then puts a point between the first six and the one.

"O.K., do the next one."

Only once did he have to correct her.

Later Evan talked about this approach: "I do not have a regular schedule for reviewing. But with just seven kids, I can keep in my mind who is doing what and who needs to review a certain skill.

"Usually I'll find a time when everyone is busy. Then, I'll call a student up to the chalkboard where I've written down ten or so problems. Then I have them do the problems or read or whatever while I'm right there. So if they haven't understood something, I can spot it right away and we can work on it. Sometimes I'll wait a week or so after we've covered a skill before reviewing with them. But if it's something they had a lot of trouble with, then I'll do it sooner. And I may check again the next week just to see if they've got it."

Recess

"Where's the miachi ball?" Harold is standing by Evan's desk. He glances at the wall clock: 2:00. Afternoon recess. Harold's favorite time of the day. Particularly today when the strong winds off the ocean have blown the clouds away. From the porch of the school house, away to the southwest, the volcanoes of the Aleutian Chain appear round and smooth beneath the deep snow. Evan goes in search of a ball while the classroom empties and the students head up to the hill by the old Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russians first showed up in this area in the mid-eighteenth century in search of sea otter pelts. Today, the churches and the religion they house, some surnames — like Kalmakof, Shelikof, Vanov — and the odd word — such as "banyo" for sauna — are all that remain of the Russians' century of occupation.

The miachi ball is a small rubber ball, slightly smaller than a baseball. The game is a hybrid of baseball, dodgeball, and cricket. No one keeps score and the object seems to be to avoid making an "out" and to stay in "at bat" for as long as possible.

Evan joins his students in whatever game they play during recess. He seems to use this time to be with the students in a situation that is less pressured, less structured than the classroom. In games, he exhibits the same calm, the same unhurriedness that characterizes him in the classroom.

For their part, the students seem happy to have Evan play with them.

They occasionally tease him or call his name. Usually they demonstrate their ease in his presence and their affection by simply ignoring him. They treat him, in short, as a member of the family.

Harold and his brother (who finished the eighth grade last year and is now out of school taking secondary courses by correspondence) are named captains by general acclamation. Evan is an early pick. I'm chosen last.

A couple of young men in their 20's passing by on their three-wheelers stop and join the game. Soon, other people from the village join until nearly half of the towns 50-odd year-round inhabitants are involved. Evan just lets things happen. At no time does he attempt to direct the action. After a half hour, people begin to drift off and Evan says, "O.K., let's go back to school."

The Community

After supper that night, Evan calls the Parents Advisory School Board members on the CB to remind them of a board meeting that he had arranged earlier in the week. An accreditation visit is scheduled for the end of the month and he wants to brief his PASB. I've also asked him to hold a meeting while I'm in town both so I can see him in action with community members and so that I can ask the parents on the Board about his teaching.

Three women make up the PASB, all of whom are prominent members of the community. Two of the three have children in the school. The third is the postmistress — a position of considerable importance here as in most small towns. In addition to the Board members, three other parents show up. Only one of the seven students in the school is not represented by a parent or immediate relative.

The atmosphere of the meeting, which takes place in the classroom, is extremely informal. One of the women urges Evan to make the meeting short as she hasn't had dinner yet. Others joke about the water that has leaked into the postmistresses' basement. Evan steers the conversation toward the upcoming accreditation visit.

He briefly explains the purpose of the visit, what he has done to prepare, and asks for questions. Then he asks what people think about the idea of having an end-of-the-year picnic with two of the nearby villages. The discussion is very informal as audience and board members alike opine on the menu — hot dogs, hamburgers, potato chips, ice cream and so on.

Evan next passes out to all present copies of a calendar for the coming school year that he has received from the district office. The calendar apparently conforms to this year's model.

"They'd like to get all the schools in the district on the same calendar but we don't have to accept the idea." He looks up and glances around at the faces in the room.

Everyone is studying the calendar and saying nothing.

Evan tries again. "Do you want to accept it as it is?"

"That's sixteen days off. . . ." The health aide seems taken aback at such laxity.

Another minute passes in silence.

"You wanna hear my opinion?" Evan offers quietly.

"Sure," the health aide replies.

Evan then proceeds to present an alternative calendar that would shorten the proposed Christmas holiday and, consequently, end school earlier.

The board members and audience discuss Evan's proposal. Then, again the room grows quiet.

"You wanna go with that, then?" Evan asks, referring to his alternative proposal.

"Sounds O.K. to me," one of the parents responds.

After waiting a half a minute, Evan closes the matter. "O.K. I'll send it on to the office."

The rest of the meeting follows this pattern: Evan brings up a topic, waits for discussion, offers an opinion, and receives little in the way of comments — much less dissent. This meeting is like dozens of others I have attended in rural Alaska. The lack of discussion does not indicate a lack of interest or concern. In fact, from their subsequent comments and asides, they proved unusually well-informed about what went on at the school. Rather, the silence expresses the trust local people place in their teachers and administrators. When professionals violate that trust, then the community become active and vocal.

When all business has been handled, he introduces me and leaves the room.

Most of the parents I have already met and talked with so they are aware of what I'm doing. I briefly explain our project and how Evan was selected. Noting that everyone I had talked to seemed to like Evan's teaching, I asked them why.

"He doesn't hold the kids back in a group. When they're ready to move on, he let's 'em." This came from the mother of a very bright eighth grader.

"I like the way he lets them work at their own pace. And the way he has them do a lot of repetition is helpful. They have to know it before they go on to the next thing. And even after they know it, he makes 'em do it again."

"And he makes 'em do the basic things first and really learn it. The other night, my little girl wanted me to read a book to her but I was doing the dishes. So I told her to wait a minute. Well, a couple of minutes later I heard her reading this book — I don't think she knew what all the words meant but she could sound them all out. And she's just a first grader."

The postmistress, who doesn't have any children in school, added, "All I hear from people is how good his methods are. People like how much their kids are learning."

Another parent, perhaps concerned that all the comments are about his teaching, interjects, "He's an all around good guy."

"Yeah," offers another, "and he does a good job. He knows his job and he does it. One reason he does such a good job is that he gets along with everybody."

I asked if there were any areas in which they felt he could do better.

After several moments of silence, a parent responded, "Well, it seems like the only time he says something about your kid is when it's not good."

"Oh, he let's you know when he's been doin' good," retorts another. This mother proceeds to describe a chance meeting she had with Evan at the post office and the detailed, positive report he had given her on her son.

The values operating in the community really come home with the last comment, again from the health aide: "Sometimes," she mused, "I think maybe he's not strict enough."

I pondered this last remark as I remembered the quiet and industry that characterize Evan's classroom and his simple disciplinary code: "You waste my time in class, I'll waste yours during recess." I also remembered the morning when Harold, restless and distracted, had sharpened his pencil frequently and gone to the bathroom several times. When recess came, Evan, as is his wont, released each student individually — but Harold's name he didn't call. Harold dutifully pulled out his math worksheet and got down to it.

This meeting turned out to be helpful in my attempt to understand Evan's effectiveness. From the comments at this meeting and from other discussions I had with community members, I could see that Evan's methods, expectations, and values complement those of the community. The culture of this remote fishing village inhabited by people who typically have a high school education or less and who are involved in manual labor is, perhaps, much more like that of Evan's hometown than meets the eye.

Another observer might deduce that Evan owes his effectiveness to his "sociolinguistic congruency" — that is, that he has adapted his pause time, rhythm, pace, synchrony, and participation structures to the culture of his students. Lacking training or background in this research tradition, I cannot judge. I asked Evan about a summer course he had taken from a leading researcher in this field. He told me that he had found the course interesting but of no practical value. If Evan is congruent culturally, I think it may be because, like all teachers who are serious about their craft, he has made an effort to understand how his students learn best.

Beyond the technical aspects of Evan's teaching are his feelings for the students. Life-long resident Bud Hedrick, the general store proprietor and a pilot for Peninsula Airlines, talked about Evan as we flew out of the village.

"Oh, he's a good one. Everyone really likes him. What makes him good is that he's easy-going with the kids but they learn. I was in school when the BIA teachers were out here. If you didn't know something, they'd hit you on the head, call you 'dummy.' That doesn't help kids learn. Evan doesn't crawl all over the student if the student makes a mistake. The students like him and they work for him."

I recalled little Sean waiting patiently at Evan's side while he finished helping another student. As he waited, he leaned his head against Evan's shoulder. Both teacher and student seemed perfectly at ease. . . .

A Singular Life

After more than a week, Evan the Effective Teacher seemed to be yielding up some of his secrets. Evan the Man, on the other hand, remained inscrutable. Here was a vigorous young man of 31 living a monkish life in a tiny fishing village on the northern coast of the Alaskan Peninsula. In some ways, he was unusually open to me — a stranger and, worse, a nosey stranger. And yet, after a week of being with him almost constantly, I still didn't know what got the man out of bed in the morning.

I asked him about his preference for being on his own in a one-teacher school.

"I'd just rather do things on my own rather than working with a crowd — although I think I can work with a crowd. I think I get along with other teachers and administrators. I just don't think I'd be happy in an eight-teacher school. I would try to be a team player — but I don't think I'd like it as well as a one- or two-teacher school. . . ."

"Do you ever get lonely?"

"Once in a while, yeah. I'll ask myself, 'Am I really happy doing this way out here by myself? I've been single for so long.' And then I think, 'Well, I know I'm not ready to get married yet' — came close two times, once back East and once at Chignik Lake — or seriously involved, anyway. Now, I'm at the point where I really haven't thought of settling down since. Looking back on it, I realize now that thing in Chignik Lake wasn't the right relationship. I don't know if I want to settle here and build a house.

If I leave Sailor Point, where do I go then? I just wouldn't want to get married and haul a family all over the state. Then you run the risk that if you marry a non-Native and she's not working, some can't handle a small village with nothing to do during the day — I've seen that happen a lot. And at the same time, a Native person might not be accepted in another village particularly if she's from a different ethnic group. So all those factors you got to keep in mind. I suppose the easiest thing to do would be to marry another teacher." We both laugh. "But the last thing I want to talk about at night is teaching styles."

"When you do need support where do you turn?"

"Mostly it passes. I get down sometimes in the dead of winter. I thought I'd never experience cabin fever in my life but I did this year. I was kind of down — probably because of that accreditation report — it was so lengthy. I just didn't give a hoot anymore about whether it got done. I think I kind of slacked off in the classroom. I tried not to but I think in a way I did. But eventually it passes . . . perhaps something on TV comes along that might change my attitude about things or. . . . I don't know. It just sort of passes.

"I really don't have anybody to turn to other than myself . . . and occasionally letters." This is said flatly, without self-pity or regret. "I correspond with family and friends back East and other people in the state — non-teachers mostly. I wasn't really sure where I was going to be next year, too. And that kinda got me down a little bit. I almost had made up my mind to leave here and go overseas. Then all these replies kept coming back saying, 'No vacancies.' Now, I've pretty much made up my mind that if the people here want me back, I'll come back here.

"But I wonder how many years you can stay in a small village before you use up your usefulness. I certainly wouldn't stay if they didn't want me to. I always ask them, 'You want me back?' So far, the answer has always been yes. But who knows what will happen in the future?"

Outside of the classroom, Evan is a man of simple pleasures. He likes to hunt and we feasted on a caribou he took recently. In the summer, he stays in the village and fishes with one of the residents. He subscribes to a financial paper and seems to take an interest in the market. And every Friday, there's a pinochle game in his kitchen. Some of the young adults from the village come up to drink tea and play cards. That's about it.

Most evenings, he spends at least some time preparing for the next day or grading papers. After an early breakfast, he spends at least an hour before the students come to school getting ready for the day, making certain that students have everything they need to keep them on task all day. Indeed, Evan considers his prep work to be the hardest part of his job: "The easiest part of teaching is from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. The hardest and most time-consuming part is the hours you put in before and after — preparing and evaluating."

There is no question that what happens in the classroom is the center of his life. All other activities spin off from his interactions with the students.

By the time I was ready to leave, I felt I at least had an inkling of what kept Evan in Sailor Point. Sean leaning his head on Evan's shoulder, the miachi game that involved most of the village, the playful banter over a Friday pinochle game, Harold cracking a quiet joke over his math book, Sandy working silently at Evan's table while he taught Brenda — these were images of Evan's relationships in Sailor Point. He had been adopted into the family that was the village. Whatever loneliness he might have experienced was perhaps dissipated by the seven children in the school who treated him not only as a teacher but also as a family member — father, older brother, and even, at times, younger brother.

NORA

Nora

When Nora Harper was 22, her husband died — an intense emotional trauma for any 22-year-old. Youth normally tempers such tragedies. At 22, life is still very much before you, still beckoning you forward.

Nora's circumstances were anything but normal. "I got married at 16. When my husband died, I had six kids to take care of. I didn't have any kind of education to fall back on, to help me get work to raise my kids."

The afternoon sun is still bright on the snow melting beyond the windows of Nora's classroom where we sit. Her desk is pushed to the side of the room. A dozen low formica tables, trapezoid-shaped to fit together in a range of configurations, are scattered about the room. A couple of dozen chairs of plastic and steel for primary students are resting, upside down, on the tables. Lined up behind a cardboard engine, an alphabet train of block letters stretches above the greenboard at the front of the room. Several dozen styrofoam coffee cups, filled with potting soil, are ranged along the chalk tray.

The room is divided by two bookcases, each about the height of a six-year-old. A passage between the bookcases allows movement between the front and back halves of the classroom. Brown indoor-outdoor carpet covers the floor. In the far corner sits an Apple IIc computer with a small Epson printer beside it.

Outside the two large windows, I can see the school's single bus straining up the hill rising from the river to where the "new housing" has been built among the tall spruce.

Despite the institutional furniture and the shadowless light of the overhead florescents, the room is comfortable. Student artwork — crayon drawings on rough newsprint of log houses with smoke coiling up from chimneys, lines of brown dogs stretched in front of sleds guided by bundled figures, snowmachines and three-wheelers — is randomly masking-taped to the walls. Nora's desk is a heap of books, teachers' manuals, students' papers, art supplies, and math flashcards. Behind the desk is a phonograph and half-a-dozen sets of headphones scattered about the floor. Like my own house, the room looks "lived in."

"I really wasn't interested in teaching," Nora continues, wrapping her strong, slender fingers around the coffee mug before her. She's not really interested in this interview either.

I've arrived in May when keeping order and students on task is, under the best of circumstances, difficult. I've been in Nora's class all day, plan to videotape her the next day, and to observe her for two more. I am the second intruder from the University to disrupt her classes this year. She's polite and cooperative but less than enthusiastic about my intrusion.

"I had always wanted to continue my education but I got married at an early age. I only went up to the sixth grade." Nora speaks in the clipped, guttural rhythms that characterize the dialect of interior Alaskan villages. Each word is snapped off clean at the end like a cold, dry spruce twig. A strong social norm toward careful thought before speaking creates long pauses in the conversation. When Nora does speak, however, she does so with a certain urgency.

"That was my goal — to continue my education — but I got married instead. So when my husband died, I had no means of supporting my family. Then, I saw this advertisement that said something like, 'If you are interested in continuing your education, join this program.' "The program was called 'ARTTC' — Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps. I saw the advertisement and said to myself, 'Well, this is for me.' I didn't know what ARTTC was at the time. Anyway, I applied and wrote down some of the goals that I wanted. And the main one was to continue my education. I just had my mind set on getting an education of any kind at that time. It was my opportunity to jump into it — so I jumped.

"Two people came out to the village to interview us. There were four of us they interviewed. And out of the four, they picked Carol and me." Carol Bowers teaches the third and fourth grades in the room next to Nora's.

As we talk, Nora has set the coffee mug on her desk and is nervously turning one hand inside the other. With prominent cheekbones, large dark eyes, and a sharply defined nose, her face has the strength and character of classic Indian beauty. Her black hair is cut fashionably short. Of medium height, her posture and movements express the same strength and purpose evident in her eyes.

"They came out here to Kalkano to interview us personally. I was really surprised when they picked me. Of the four of us, I had the least education. I'd only been as far as the sixth grade.

"Then, we went into the college in Fairbanks for a six-week training course along with all the other teams from all over Alaska. There were, let's see, one . . . two . . . three . . . four of us on a team plus the team leader."

Nora straightens up in her chair suddenly and smiles. "I didn't even realize I was going to become a teacher until after I got up to Fairbanks. The whole purpose of the program was to train future Alaska teachers. That really took me by surprise. I was wondering how — with me having gone up to only the sixth grade — I was going to continue with all these university courses.

"That was in 1970. I struggled those first years. I don't know how many times I said I was going to quit." Nora looks down at the desk and rubs out an imaginary spot. "Because I had to leave my family every summer for six weeks. I had to hire a babysitter to take care of all my kids. My oldest one was just six years old. My youngest one was three. In the fall and winter, we took correspondence courses through ARTTC. It was all required courses. They just told us what to take.

"It took me five years to get my Bachelor's degree. It took the others on my team just four years but I ran into some problems. Like my last year I had to drop a couple of courses because it was just too heavy a load. But I stuck with it and —" leaning back in her chair and spreading out her arms, Nora concludes, "— here I am."

From watching her teach and from earlier conversations, I knew that Nora obviously enjoys learning. I wondered if her own experience in school had motivated her to become a teacher.

"I enjoyed school but we had such a strict teacher. . . ." The Sisters of St. Ann had started a school in Kalkano at the turn of the century — Our Ladies of the Snow School. Until 1969, the Catholic church continued to run the school in Kalkano.

"I had the same teacher for all six years. She always told us that education is the most important thing and that we should try to make something of ourselves. It stuck in my head, you know, all that time. When I was in ARTTC, I just kept at it, even if it was tough. What she had said stuck with me. . . ."

Nora looks up and leans back in her chair, looking around the room. "In fact, of all the students she had, most of them are a success today. So, she did a good job."

Our Ladies of the Snow School that Nora and her contemporaries attended was part of a world that Nora's first and second graders know only second hand. The present, state-supported school, built in the late 1960s, dominates the old town site with its jumble of small, low mud-chinked log cabins as medieval cathedrals dwarfed the surrounding huts of villagers in the Middle Ages.

Walking among the cabins — most of which have been abandoned for the larger, brighter, more convenient log houses on the hillside — one can visualize the world in which Nora grew to maturity: The smell of spruce fires burning in sheet-metal stoves; the soft, flickering glow of kerosene lamps behind hoar-frosted windows from which the snow had to be dug after each new snowfall; the howling of sled dogs chained to stakes outside of each cabin; the log caches like miniatures of the cabins behind which they stand on stilts to protect dried fish and moose, bear, and bird meat from the dogs; the men driving their dogs through thigh-deep winter snows to check trap lines and take moose; parkas, mukluks and hats sewn from silver wolf, burnished brown beaver, and burnt orange fox; families piling sleeping, cooking, and fishing gear into flat river boats for the summer move to fishing camps along the banks of the Yukon. . . .

Pockets of that life still exist in the community. As a way of life for Nora's students, these sights and sounds are gone.

Now, a couple of miles up the hillside behind the old town site, a new village has arisen. The structures built from native spruce logs are no longer moss-chinked cabins crowded helter-skelter together but houses on large lots arranged in neat blocks divided by roads that run at right angles to one another. The construction of these new houses was subsidized by the BIA. The children who climbed down from the yellow school bus wear Holofil jackets and moon boots. While dog-sledding is enjoying a revival, the two-cycle nasal whine of snowmachines, three-wheelers, and chain saws has largely replaced the throaty, evocative howl of malemutes. Along the river front, beached fishwheels litter the bank. They belong to villagers who now spend most of the summer in town fishing rather than going to camp.

Rapid change has become another common element of the earth's atmosphere. Few places have, however, experienced the degree and rapidity of change common in interior Alaska. That most of Nora's contemporaries have successfully navigated these changes is a testament to individual and communal resourcefulness — and, according to Nora, to a no-nonsense Sister of St. Ann.

"She always told us," Nora continues, "that if you want to stay here and go out to fish camp and trap, you can do that. But, she said, there's so much out there for you to go out and try instead of just being around here and laying around and not making anything of yourself. She was always pushing that.

"That was years ago. It's so different now. Students nowadays got so much going for them. Long time ago, options were pretty limited. That's the reason I got married so young. I didn't have anything to turn to."

Nora's voice is very matter-of-fact, betraying neither regret nor bitterness. Despite the travails of early widowhood, supporting a family while completing her education, and leaving her children for five summers to attend the University, she is hardly self-congratulatory about her accomplishments.

"I got a lot of encouragement and support from my family, my friends, and all the people in town. They kept encouraging me to go back. There were many times I wanted to quit. It got really tough because I didn't have much schooling. I wasn't prepared for all the reading and all the written assignments. I stuck through it with a lot of help from my friends.

"People in town said, 'Well, if you can raise six kids, you can get along with kids.' That was their attitude toward what I was doing. I don't know what they think now," Nora says, her dark eyes narrowing with humor. "Now that I've been teaching their kids for nine years, maybe some of them want to get rid of me."

In conversations with several Alaska Native teachers in southeastern Alaska, I had discovered that returning to teach in your home town, while ideal in theory, could be uncomfortable. Expectations for home-grown teachers appeared to be more rigid and exacting. I asked Nora about her experience.

"I get along pretty good with most people here. There may be a couple of people who expect more from you. But, being from here makes it easier because you know these kids. You know them so you know what you can expect from them. You know you can get more from some of them than they are putting out. Because some of those kids got so much potential and there is just no encouragement from their parents. You want them to do so much, so much more."

Nora's observation seemed to echo that of her own elementary teacher.

She flatted her palms on the desk and pressed. "You can't go beyond that because" — she pauses staring at the narrow space between her hands — "there is no encouragement from home. From some of the parents there is just no encouragement."

Nora stops. Not given to drama, she repeats her point for emphasis. The hands are still flat, the eyes trained on them.

I shift to another subject, asking her why Kalkano had sent so many graduates on to post-secondary education and training.

"Let me think about that for a while." She gets up, takes her coffee cup off the desk, and leaves the room. A couple of minutes later, she's back with a refill and her response.

"Well, I think we've got something good going here because there are so many native teachers. Most of the kids who come to school here kinda look up to you because you are a native teacher. It influences them. They think, 'Education must be important. If she's a teacher, then I can become one.' And it's not only the native teachers. The other teachers here are good, too, and the students look up to them.

"All the teachers are trying to influence the kids to go on to more education. When you look at it, there's not just Carol and me but we're getting more and more native teachers in the area. Maybe that's what starts students thinking, 'If they can do it, why can't we?' When you ask kids nowadays, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' — the famous question," her cheeks round into a smile, "— you hear a lot of them say, 'I want to be a teacher just like you.' So I think it's the native teachers in the area that are a big part of the influence on kids to go on for more education.

"Most of the parents of kids graduating from high school want their kids to go on to college. But I think some of them are kind of getting discouraged lately because their kids go to college for a while and they can only go so far and then the funding runs out. Many of the parents just don't have any income to help them out. The tuition is so high now, too. Most people around here can't afford it.

"So, I hear a lot of them talking now about wanting their kids to go on to some kind of trade school rather than college. But I don't know how many feel that way. I just get that from sitting around and talking with parents."

I ask Nora about the advantage of being a life-long member of the community in understanding and addressing the problems of individual children.

"It makes it is easier for me. I know right away when a child is having a problem. It's usually not just a problem in the classroom, it's a problem outside, too. But the parents won't tell you."

Nora pauses, gathers her thoughts, and proceeds, "Some students are from homes where the parents are having trouble. The student comes to school. The student didn't get enough rest or didn't eat breakfast or something. So, he comes and tells you — and even tells you their secret that they are not supposed to talk about. They'll talk it out with you.

"They are so open because, maybe, we're Native, too. They don't even care if other kids are around. They just come right out and they'll tell you. They don't know that they are saying something that maybe they shouldn't be saying."

Having spent a couple of days in Nora's classroom already, I knew what a fast-paced, busy place it is. I asked her if she had difficulty finding the time during the day to talk with a troubled student.

"Yeah, it's a problem. Some days you've got your groups going and you're working with one of them and this certain kid wants all your attention, wants to talk about his problem. There are times when you just have to say, 'O.K., can we talk about this later because we have a whole bunch of students running around here that need help?' When I had an aide, they would go over and talk to her. Maybe most of the time she'd have a better ear for their problems than I would because she would take time out to listen."

Watching Nora over several days, I could see the tension between her desire to push students as far as possible in mastering academic skills — particularly reading skills — and her desire to listen to their excitements, fears, concerns, and fantasies. Out of this tension emerges the urgency I felt in her classroom. Like a butterfly, she rarely lights. When she does, she seems merely to be gathering her thoughts for the next burst of activity. And, always, beside her as she sits, above her as she kneels, below her as she bends, before her as she stands, are students.

". . . And Most Important of All is Reading."

8:30. In one corner of the room, five children wearing headphones are grouped around a 45-rpm record player. One of the children is holding a book open on her lap, tilted so all can see. She periodically turns the page, apparently at the prompting of a signal on the record. In the other corner in front of the windows, Elaine, an aide who spends the morning in Nora's room, is stapling together some worksheets. Two girls are standing across the table, talking quietly with her. Three boys are standing around a hexagonal table. Eric, another student, is hanging around me as I try to get a video camera set up to record the day's activities.

Nora is at her desk, her gradebook open before her. "Romeo. . .," she calls.

The handsome, black-haired child who responds could probably pass for a Montague.

"Byron. . . ."

Another boy, holding his hand against a very red eye, responds, "Here."

(Some hard-core romantics among Kalkano's parents, I wonder.)

"Christopher. . . ."

"Elliot. . . ." (Perhaps just poetry-lovers.) Nora continues through the roll. Although the official start of the school day is still five minutes away, all but two of the students are present. And one of the missing students is ill. All of the students present are at work.

Closing her gradebook, Nora, her hands in the pockets of her neatly creased black slacks, walks to the front of the room to a calendar made of green construction paper.

As she walks, Nora says, raising her voice, "O.K., today is the second of — I mean the third of . . .?"

Simultaneously, Elliot and Christopher answer, "May!"

Nora takes a small card with a "3" on it from an envelope pinned on the bulletin board beside the calendar and staples the "3" in its place.

"O.K., and what day is it?" Nora asks, her back to the class. Only Elliot, Romeo, and Christopher are following her. The other students are working on their "books" crafted from eleven-by-eighteen-inch construction paper stapled together. Laboriously, they are coloring pictures that they have drawn on the covers.

"Friday the third," calls out Romeo.

Elliot, disdainful of such ignorance, shrilly mocks, "Friday?"

"Thursday the third," corrects Nora.

She looks at the calendar critically, "Let's count the days 'til Mother's Day." She points to each day remaining on the calendar before the third Sunday in May and counts, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten."

She slips her hands into her pockets and, turning around, looks to Elaine for confirmation. "I think it's the third Sunday in May." From the back of the room, Elaine nods.

Byron has turned around in his chair and is watching Nora.

"So, we've got to make something. . . ." This is a mental note, said under her breath.

She walks by the table where Christy, Nathan, and Eric are working on their "books." They look up as she passes on her way to the other side of the chalkboard.

"So, the rules —" she points to five lines written on the chalkboard:

Rules
No talking
Listen carefully
Be quiet
Raise your hand

"— I don't know if any of you are going to follow them today but let's give it a try —" Nora is alluding to two circumstances. The previous day, several students did not follow the rules and, indeed, breached them with such frequency that they had to stay after school to sit quietly with Nora at the round table in the back corner completing ditto worksheets. Quite correctly, Nora believes the high level of inappropriate behavior is related to my disruptive intrusion into her classroom — the second circumstance.

On the chalkboard, beside the rules are the names of the five students who had to stay after school the day before. As she erases these, she continues, "— so none of you will have to stay after school today."

A boy near the wall says softly, "My auntie Vicky had a baby."

"She did?" Nora responds, looking at the boy, the eraser in one hand, her other hand in her pocket. "What'd she have . . .?"

The boy seems confused.

Nora senses his confusion and adds, "A boy or a girl?"

"Boy."

Nora takes a few steps in the boy's direction, looking at him. Then she turns toward the back of the room where four girls sit with Elaine. "Carla, when is your birthday?" she asks of one of the girls.

"Friday," a girl in pigtails responds.

Turning back toward the calendar, Nora says, "Tomorrow. Let's mark it before we forget it." She walks over to the calendar, takes a magic marker from the envelope on the board, turns back toward Carla and asks, before she writes, "Are you sure it's tomorrow?"

Carla nods her assurance and Nora responds, "O.K." and writes on the calendar.

Christy, Byron, and Romeo are back at work on their "books." Eric has wandered up toward Nora. Elliot is in his seat, watching Nora.

"So we have a birthday coming up and it's tomorrow."

Nora looks around the room, circles around to the table where Christy, Byron, and Romeo are at work, taps the back of an empty chair and announces, "O.K., I'll be working with One." The students continue their activities not looking up.

She swings around to Elliot and Donna. Picking up two workbooks from their table, she slaps them down again, "And you guys can work on this while I finish up with Group One and then I'll come back and work with you."

In the meantime, in the back of the room, Elaine has started reading with the second grade group.

Nora straightens up the table and pushes Donna's chair to give her room to work. She then turns back to Group One — half of whom are at the table. The others are wandering about.

She looks through the students' "books" lying on the table. Byron is holding a wet paper towel to his red eye. He takes the towel away and touches the eye gingerly. Nora looks up and says, "Don't bother it, Byron. The more you bother it. . . . It'll just get worse."

Elliot walks over to Byron and asks, "What happened?"

Romeo answers for Byron, "Someone picked up a stick and hit him in the eye, O.K.?" Romeo's acidic tone implies that Elliot is somehow responsible for the mishap — or, at the very least, he should mind his own business.

Meanwhile, Nora is trying to get Eric, who has been wandering distractedly about the room almost since he arrived, to join Group One. "Eric. . . ." He doesn't turn around. Louder, Nora repeats, "Eric. . . ." Eric and Donna continue to look into the styrofoam cups of potting soil. Nora looks up at Eric, realizes that she must act to get him where he belongs, and walks toward him, brushing back a strand of hair from her forehead in a characteristic gesture of exasperation.

She points to the table she has arranged for Donna and Elliot. "Donna, you sit down and get to work. You too, Elliot." The latter has wandered over and now takes his seat. Nora picks up an open workbook and sets it in front of Donna. Eric walks by and puts his hand on Nora's back. Something is going on with Eric. Sensing this, Nora looks up and studies him as he walks by her. She pushes Elliot's chair around, straightens the table again, turns to the chalk tray, and picks up a stack of manila cards with a rubber band around them.

Earlier that morning, before students began to arrive, I had watched Nora set these cards on the chalk tray. These cards were but one of several sets of materials that she had placed strategically around the room. As the day wore on, I realized that she had thought through, in a concrete and spatial fashion, her movements. She had actually choreographed her movements, strategically placing props, such as these cards, to minimize movement and time loss. The materials may have also been visual prompts, reminding her of what she had planned next.

Tapping the cards with her hand, she says, "O.K. Grade One, sit down." Using her leg, she pushes Byron and his chair around so that he will be able to see the board. Christy is still perched on the table.

Later Nora told me that this had been a difficult year in part because of Christy. Christy is Nora's youngest child. With large dark eyes, long black hair plaided into braids accentuated with yellow ribbons, and a smile that settles on the beholder like a benediction, she is picture-book pretty. Added to which Christy is very bright, remarkably knowledgeable about the world (in the way that only first graders who are the last of seven children can be), and utterly charming. For her mother, the combination is, in class, overtaxing. Christy seems to be everywhere, interested in everything, and has an opinion about everyone.

Eric is still looking through the students' "books" on the table. Nora puts her hand on top of them and draws them toward her, saying to the boy, "Eric, you heard me. . . ." Christy takes her seat. Six first graders now sit around the table. Immediately behind Nora, Donna and Elliot are working. In the back, Elaine is reviewing vocabulary with the four second-graders. Four minutes have lapsed since class began.

Nora pushes Christy's chair around so that she can see the chalkboard. On the board, before class, Nora has written two columns of seven words each. She now steps over to the board points to the first word and says, "O.K., we have the word . . . ?"

Romeo calls out, "Honeycomb."

Nora points to the second word on the list.

"Just." Romeo is joined by the other students.

Nora works her way down the list. After the last word, she announces, "We'll go over the words and then we'll make sentences using the new words and then we'll write them in our books, O.K.?" She holds the cards at waist level, facing toward the students. As the students call out the words, she drops the cards on the table. In the midst of the cards, Nora says, without interrupting the activity, "Christy, if you don't put that in your pocket, I'll take it away from you." Christy is playing with a small calculator. The students call out the words together. Near the end of the stack, Nora reaches out, takes the small calculator that Christy is again playing with, and slips it into her pocket.

When all the cards are on the table, Nora gathers them up, taps them on their edges, and says, "One more time — around."

Holding the cards now at kid-eye-level, she says, "Ready? First. . . ." She turns the cards toward Christy. She turns the cards toward each student in order around the table and each reads, in a soft voice, the word.

"O.K.," comments Nora when the cards are finished. She returns the stack to the chalktray and turns to Elliot and Donna who are working silently. Over their shoulders she glances at their workbooks. Leaning over Elliot, she takes a minute to show him how to complete a fill-in-the-blank exercise.

Turning back to the first graders who have been talking quietly among themselves, Nora announces, as she picks up a piece of chalk, "O.K., using these words right here —" she points to the word list on the board, notices Eric is staring off into space, and calls him back, "Eric." She waits until he looks at her. Then she begins again.

"Using these words right here — Christy (who has begun to whisper to Eric) — how would you make a sentence using the word 'honeycomb'? Can anyone of you tell me?"

"There is a honeycomb in that tree," answers Romeo.

"O.K.," Nora says as she prints the sentence carefully on the board.

When she finishes, she turns back to the class. "O.K., using 'Joe' and 'Steve'?"

Nora continues to elicit sentences from the students. Several times she has to tell Christy to sit down. Elliot and Donna also get up and wander about. In the back, the second graders continue their reading group activities with Elaine. Throughout, Eric has his head on the table and doesn't join in the group effort to create sentences. The first graders change and amend one another's sentences: "'Betty' and 'Sue' go to the park," offers Christopher.

"'Betty' and 'Sue' are going to the park," corrects Byron.

Nora, who had already printed Christopher's sentences, erases part of the original and changes it to Byron's revised version.

"What about the word 'ripples'?" asks Nora.

"The ocean has ripples," offers Byron.

Her left hand still in her pocket, Nora begins to write and comments, "That's a good one." To the laughter of his classmates, Eric adds quietly, "The ocean has nipples." If Nora heard the remark, she doesn't let on.

When she has filled the board with sentences, Nora goes back and underlines the new words.

As the teacher walks back to the table, Christy suggests, "Now we have to read that story back over again."

"Which one?" asks Nora.

"Uhh — that one about the typewriter."

Nora looks up at Christy and responds, "Why don't you get these sentences down first and then I need to work with this group —" she gestures behind her toward Donna and Elliot "— and I want to see your very best writing."

"But —" begins Christy.

Nora turns toward Christy and, raising her voice slightly, adds, "AND, if we have time, we'll read it again." On the point of protesting again, Christy pauses, seems to consider Nora's tone, and closes her mouth.

As she passes out to the students their "books" that they have made and decorated, Nora repeats, gesturing behind her towards Elliot and Donna, "I have to work with them."

Elliot gets up again. "You're always working with us. Better to work with them," he says irritably. He's been antsy all morning. The prospect of Nora standing over him turns him positively grumpy. Elliot, who has lived in Fairbanks and spent time in the 'lower 48,' is accustomed to getting by on his quick wit and excellent communication skills. Being the center of Nora's attention means he will actually have to use his intelligence and skills.

"Shhhh —" says Nora without turning around to look at Elliot, "don't get mad, don't get mad." Her tone is oddly apologetic. She holds one of the books at kids' eye-level and says, "Now, this one has no name." Most of the first graders are already flipping through their books and do not look up. Nora looks at Nathan and asks, "Is it yours?" showing him the cover.

Nathan shakes his head. Byron has just returned to the table from sharpening his pencil. Nora shows him the book. "This must be yours." Byron stares at the book, not giving anything away.

"Write your name on it." Nora's tone is neutral. Whenever she corrects academic or procedural mistakes in class, she does so in a flat tone. Simply pointing out the mistake is sufficient. In dealing with behavior, though, she generates quiet but intense heat.

Straightening up, Nora announces, "O.K., now we'll fix the tables so you can work." She begins moving the small tables around so that a pair of students can work at each. As their books are made from 18 inch construction paper each student requires nearly three feet to work on his open book.

The students talk quietly among themselves while Nora arranges the desks. Nathan can't find his pencil. Nora tells him, "Look in the top drawer of my desk. You might find one there." Byron is still holding his hand over his eye.

Nora goes to the board and begins erasing and rewriting words that she thinks aren't legible. She steps back from the board, her hands in her back pockets, and critically surveys her handiwork like an oil painter looking over a canvas. Meanwhile, the first graders have settled down to their task. Nora goes back to the first graders and again rearranges tables to make copying the sentences on the board easier.

She goes to her desk to get another pencil — this one for Romeo — and walks over to Elliot and Donna. As she passes Eric, she puts her hand on his head and asks, "Can you see here?" "Yeah," the boy responds and bends his head over his task.

Nora stands between Elliot and Donna and asks, "O.K., are we ready?" She erases a list of dozen or so words from the chalkboard in front of them. Pulling over a chair, she sits down across from the students. Looking at Nora expectantly, Elliot asks, "Are we reading?" Nora doesn't answer but takes each of the students' workbooks.

Donna and Elliot have been working on an exercise to identify vowel sounds. Nora looks over Donna's workbook and asks her about mistakes that she has made.

"Donna," Nora glances up at the girl, "'whale'. . . ?"

Donna is silent.

"What vowel sound do you hear in 'whale'?"

Donna still does not answer.

"Long 'e,'" suggests Elliot, who has hoisted himself up on his elbows so that he can see Donna's workbook across the table in front of his teacher.

"Whaaaaale," repeats Nora, drawing out the "a" sound. "Long 'a,'" ventures Elliot, undaunted by either his first mistake or Nora's lack of encouragement.

Nora repeats, "Long 'a,'" and makes the correction in Donna's notebook. "That's wrong." She glances up at Donna who doesn't meet her teacher's eyes.

Nora continues to look over the page. "I don't hear a short 'e' sound in 'ship.' I hear it in 'bed' — eeeeeeeee." Again, she lifts her eyes to the little girl.

"What about in 'knife'? What sound do you hear?"

The girl murmurs, "'i.'"

"Yeah, this is wrong." Nora continues down the list. "And 'jeep' would be long, right?" She pushes her bangs off her forehead with two sweeps of her hand. Donna seems to know her teacher is exasperated with her without looking up.

"What vowel are you working with?" Nora asks, looking at Donna.

"Short 'e,'" responds Elliot.

"Right and what vowel do you hear in 'calm' — aaaaaaaaah?"

"Short 'a,'" Donna answers in a whisper.

"Right — so how come you marked it as a short 'e'?"

Christy is up again, going from classmate to classmate, checking on their progress. I usher her back to her seat. She's nearly finished copying the sentences.

Nora continues through the exercise with Donna. Christy interrupts to ask if she can go to the bathroom. The other first graders quietly copy from the board.

"What about 'her'?" she asks Donna who is whispering to Elliot. When Donna doesn't respond, Nora's voice rises in frustration: "You're not listening." The last word is drawn out taut with emotion. Nora finishes looking through Donna's work and sets it aside.

"O.K., let's go over our word book," Nora announces to Elliot and Donna. Apparently Elliot has gotten all the vowel sounds correct as Nora asks him no questions about his answers.

"You read one page," says Nora speaking to Elliot, "and then she will read one page."

The students each pick up a long thin pad that looks like the kind of notepads that reporters use. On each page are printed long lists of words.

Elliot and Donna take turns reading these words. They read through some hundred words without faltering. Obviously, they are reviewing words that they have previously encountered in their reading.

When Donna reads the last of the words, Nora comments, "Very good," her chin propped up on her hand.

"That was the last one, right? O.K., now turn over to a new page. You guys are going to write down your new words."

Nora rises and assumes her stance for writing on the chalkboard: Left hand in her pocket, her shoulders hunched slightly forward, and chalk in her right hand. She writes a list of some twenty words on the board directly in front of Donna and Elliot. She then pulls her chair around beside Elliot and sits down. She checks a workbook, gets up to turn Byron around so that he is facing the board again, and then talks quietly with Elliot, correcting some of his phonics exercises.

The room is very quiet now as the second graders with Elaine are also writing. When Nora notices Elliot whispering to Donna, she asks, "Are you finished?" Elliot replies that he isn't. "Okay, come on, hurry up."

A minute or so later she again asks Donna and Elliot if they have finished writing down the words. She gets up, and pointing to each in turn, has them read. Then she goes back through the words randomly asking them to say the word and make a sentence with it.

Elliot is fully engaged in the exercise. He eagerly makes sentences and interacts with Nora. Donna flips through her word-list book, not looking at either the board or Nora.

Several of the first graders have finished copying their sentences and are becoming restless.

Nora now sends Donna and Elliot to get their readers which are in the bookcase ranged along the wall. When they resume their seats, Nora tells them, "O.K., open your books to page 72. Let's read 'Bridges' together."

"Can I read?" asks Elliot eagerly.

Nora nods, but says, "Both of you can read — together."

They begin to read, Donna in a surprisingly loud, raspy voice.

". . . I watched the water slide mostly. . . ." the two children read, now in unison, now with Elliot slightly faster.

"No — that's not 'mostly.' What's that word?" interrupts Nora.

"'Smoothly . . .,'" corrects Elliot.

"Right."

The two children continue reading as Nora interrupts occasionally to correct them or to introduce a new vocabulary word. Elliot stops the reading to talk about the bridge over the Tanana River at Nenana. In the air, his hand describes the arch of the steel girders. Nora listens to him, her chin resting on her hand. Donna, too, listens. Even at seven, Elliot has the style and exuberance of a born raconteur.

"O.K., so what kind of bridge is this?" asks Nora when Elliot has finished his disquisition on the bridge.

When neither student answers, she points to the sentence in Elliot's book and reads, "A huge bridge."

Nathan wanders over from his seat and announces, "I'm finished."

Nora turns to him and asks, "Have you drawn a picture for your cover?" Nathan shakes his head. "O.K." — and she inclines her head toward his empty seat. Nathan returns to his place and resumes work.

As is her custom, Nora is working from the teacher's guide for the reading series she uses. She asks Donna and Elliot to write down the words with short "e" sounds from the "Bridge" story they just read. She then asks them the sounds of different vowels in words from the story.

"Nora, Nora." Byron, standing by his desk, is trying to get his teacher's attention.

When she looks up at him, Byron points toward Eric who is standing with his back to the class in front of the electric pencil sharpener. "Eric's sharpening his eraser."

Nora looks at the offender who has turned to face his accuser. "Eric, you don't put your eraser in there. If you do that again, you'll have to be asked to leave the room for a while until you start behaving."

"O.K., Donna what vowel do you hear in the word 'each'?"

Donna doesn't answer. Nora waits. Then, on a piece of butcher paper on the table, she writes "each" and draws a long vowel mark above the vowels. "When you have two vowels together like this, it's a long sound. Always long." She looks at Donna who doesn't return her look.

"What about 'beak,' Donna?"

"Long," replies the little girl in a whisper.

"Why is it long?"

Again Donna doesn't respond. She stares at the book in front of her.

"Look at the word. Two vowels together again."

Nora looks back at the teacher's manual beside her and begins to read aloud the pronunciation rule covering two vowels together. She glances up at Donna who drops the styrofoam cup with which she has been surreptitiously playing under the table. When she bends over to pick up the cup, Nora looks at her and in a low voice says, "Donna, I'll have to ask you to close your book and go stand out in the hallway."

Donna gets up immediately and leaves the room. Nora resumes the exercise with Elliot, reading out words and asking him to distinguish between short and long "e" sounds.

Nathan again approaches Nora and announces to her that he is finished. "Well, go over to the corner there and find a book and read it quietly at your desk." In the corner is a bookshelf containing children's books. Nathan does as he is told.

Eric is up wandering about the room. Nathan has gotten a book but is kneeling in his chair watching what is going on at Byron and Romeo's table.

Nora gets up and walks out into the hall, saying to Elliot, "I'll be right back."

She returns immediately with Donna. Noticing Eric wandering about, she says, "Eric, you know what to do."

Donna and Nora resume their seats and their work. Meantime, Eric has gotten a book from the shelf and is back at his seat. When Nora is absorbed, he gets up again and begins to poke a pair of scissors into the pencil sharpener. Nora looks up just in time. "Eric, if you don't leave that alone, you're going to the office." The boy returns to his seat.

A tall, bearded young man comes into the classroom. This is Mark Swenson, the bilingual instructor. He goes to the back and waits for the students with Elaine to finish their workbook assignment. He then takes two of the girls to a table on the side of the classroom and begins playing a word attack game with them.

Nora has, meanwhile, collected the first graders' "books" and has asked the students to clear off their desks. She puts a hand on Eric's shoulder and guides him away from the chalkboard where he is drawing.

She looks around to make sure all desks are clear. Elaine has left for the third and fourth grade room next door. Twelve students are now facing Nora, ready to work. She erases the sentences off the board with a few quick strokes.

"Okay, there are some of us that need to work on our vowel sounds — short and long. We're having problems and we're going to work with one vowel today." As she talks she paces in front of the students, waving a stack of manila cards before her face like a fan.

"First of all, we'll go over our sounds, O.K.?" She reaches up with both hands and sweeps her bangs off her forehead.

Taking up a piece of chalk she asks, "What are our vowels? Who remembers them?"

"A, E —" Elliot is cut off quickly.

Pointing at her star pupil, Nora says, "I want to see hands raised." Elliot raises his hand and Nora nods at him.

"A, E, I, O —" begins Elliot.

"Wait, wait — give me one vowel."

"A," repeats Elliot.

She points to Aaron who responds with "E." She continues around the room. When Byron shouts out "U, U, U," Nora points at him and says, "Your hand is not raised." Quickly, all the vowels are listed.

"Okay, we're working with long and short, right?" She looks at her students and then back at the board. "And we're going to work on this one here —" she draws a circle around the "E" "— long and short."

Looking at the girls at the back of the class, she asks, "Rita, how can we sound out long 'e'?" On the board as she talks she writes an "e" with a long vowel sign above it.

Rita looks a her teacher. The largest child in the room, she is slightly overweight. She is smiling in embarrassment.

Nora waits almost ten seconds. When Rita doesn't answer Nora looks around the room, saying to Rita, apologetically, "I thought I saw your hand raised." Christy has used the pause to get up yet again. Romeo has his hand up and Nora points to him.

"Eeeee," responds Romeo.

"Eeeee, right," echoes Nora. In the same breath, she says to Donna who has gotten up, "Donna, in your place."

"Okay, Martha, short 'e.'"

"Eh," comes the reply.

"Eh," repeats Nora as she writes "e" with a short vowel sign above it.

Byron raises his hand and, when Nora looks at him, asks, "Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Can you wait?" asks Nora.

Byron nods and lowers his hand.

"Okay, give me a word for long 'e,' Elliot," she says, pointing to Elliot who is right in front of her.

"Long 'e'?" responds Elliot, buying himself a few seconds to think. Nora waits a full five seconds before pointing to another student.

"Donna."

"Mean," responds Donna whose brief exile to the hall seems to have focused her attention.

"O.K., 'mean,'" repeats Nora as she writes the word on the board beside the long "e." "One more, Romeo." She points to Romeo and waits. "Long 'e,'" she prompts.

"Meat," calls out Aaron.

"O.K., 'meat,' she writes on the board.

"Beak," Christy calls out. Nora adds this to the list.

Facing the class again, still holding the "footstep" cards in her hand, Nora looks at the back row of students and asks, "How about you, Carla, any long 'e' words?" Carla has not been a part of the exercise. She hasn't been misbehaving but rather just spacing out.

Carla squirms but doesn't look at her teacher. Christy pops up, waving her hand, "I know one — 'eat.'"

"O.K., 'eat.'" Nora turns and writes the word on the board.

She takes a couple of more words. Then, tapping the board with a piece of chalk where she has written "e" with a short vowel sound above it, she says, "O.K., let's work on the 'eh' sound. Romeo."

"Bed," says Romeo as he lowers his hand.

"Bed. Right." Nora turns and writes the word on the board.

She calls on Rita next who has her hand raised at the back of the room.

"Let."

She calls on Romeo again who had his hand up. Christy pops up and walks to the back of the class. Without breaking stride, Nora says, in an even, matter-of-fact tone, "Christy, if you don't want to pay attention, go — out the door."

Christy quickly returns to her table. Nora continues with the exercise. Soon on the board are a row of short "e" words beneath the row of long "e" words. The students have caught on to the activity. When it ends they continue to generate words like car motors that keep kicking over after the ignition is switched off: "Men!" "Pet!" "Get!"

"Okay. When we have two vowels together, the 'e' says it's own name" — as she talks, she puts a long vowel sign over each double vowel combination on the board. "And" — she points to the line of short "e" words — "how do we sound out short 'e'?"

A chorus of "eh" sounds come back. "O.K." Satisfied, she shuffles through the footprint cards in her hand.

Byron sees his opportunity in the transition of activities — and seizes it. "CanIgotothebathroomnowNora?" he asks, jumping to his feet.

Motioning toward the hallway, Nora admonishes, "Yeah — but come back right away."

Elliot is watching Nora shuffle the footprints. "You're passing out your feet?" Nora smiles and nods as her lips move silently, counting the cards.

"We'll smell the toes?" Elliot is having fun with the idea.

Nora finishes counting and announces, "O.K., I'm going to pass out some feet to you. And you tell me if it's long or short."

Other students have joined Elliot in playing with the foot idea. "You have any Big Foots?" asks a giggling Romeo, delighted with his joke.

Nora circulates about the room, slapping a footprint face down on the table before each student. Quietly, the students continue their foot gags. Elliot holds his up his nose, screws up his face, and turns away in mock disgust — "P - UUUU."

When Nora returns to the front of the class and begins to erase the chalkboard, Christy walks up, puts her arm around Nora's waist, and whispers something. Without looking down, Nora responds, "Yeah," and turns back to the class.

"O.K., who wants to be first?"

Several hands go up. "Say your word and tell me if it is long or short." Nora rakes her bangs away from her face and looks out over half dozen raised arms.

"Ahhhhhhhhh . . . Martha," says Nora pointing to a girl in the back of the room.

"Bed. Short 'e.'"

"Right." Nora writes the word on the board and crowns it with a short vowel sign. During the evaluative exercise, only one student fails to correctly identify the vowel sound of his word. Students that had evidenced some problems earlier — such as Rita and Donna — have no problem identifying the vowel sounds in their words.

Throughout the exercise, students have become increasingly restless. During the activity, Nora had gradually increased the pace both to forestall further off-task behavior and to move quickly to another activity. As she retrieves the footsteps, she also retrieves Christy who has moved back next to Rita. Cupping her hand around Christy's head, Nora guides her back to her desk.

"Eric . . . will you get the scissors and pass out some to everybody?"

"And uhh . . ." Nora steps over to Byron who has already stood up anticipating his teacher's request. "Glue," Nora says to him quietly, putting her hands on his shoulder and turning him back toward to the supply cabinet at the side of the room.

As Eric and Byron circulate among the tables, the other students help themselves to scissors and glue from institutional size tin cans that once held peaches in syrup or other school food.

Several of the students jump out of their seats and rush to the back to help themselves to Elmer's glue containers.

"Sit down . . . Donna . . . Nathan . . ." Hands on hips, Nora tries to maintain some semblance of order.

Within a couple of minutes, all materials are distributed and the students are in their chairs.

Nora holds up a mimeographed worksheet covered with line drawings of various objects — bed, feet, bee and so on. She explains the activity: "O.K., on these two worksheets we have two things to do. We have a sheet that has a place for pictures with long 'e' and a place for pictures with short 'e.' From the other worksheet — she holds up the second mimeographed page — you have to cut out the pictures of things with long 'e' and paste them there" — pointing to the place on the worksheet — "and cut out the ones that have short 'e' and paste them here" — pointing to the other space.

"Where do I paste them?" asks Elliot, frowning at the sheets on his table.

Nora holds up the first worksheet. "You'll paste them right here — on this . . ." she holds the worksheet at arms length ". . . donkey."

"Zebra!" comes a chorus of corrections.

"O.K., zebra."

The students get down to work immediately. Nora circulates around the room, finds some more glue sticks in her drawer, and substitutes the more manageable sticks for the dripping squeeze bottles. A few students talk but most work quietly.

Nora moves constantly. She stops by Christy and Eric's table. She puts a hand to Eric's forehead. He twists away. She persists.

"You're hot." Eric doesn't look up. "You got a headache?" Eric shakes his head. Then, under his breath, he announces, "I'm sick, though."

"You are sick. You're really warm." Nora moves away, frowning but conscious that she needs to monitor the rest of the class. She spends fifteen seconds with Nathan, twenty with Romeo, twenty more with Byron. She picks up a piece of paper from the computer table, tosses it in the trash, and stops at Christy's desk again, checking her work. She moves over to Elliot who can't get any glue out of his bottle.

She picks up on Nathan looking through books at the back of the room. Nora walks over, glances at the worksheet on his table, and marches to the back of the room. Grabbing him by the elbow, she guides him back to his desk, sits him in his chair, perches on the desk beside him, her arms folded sternly across her chest. "Everyone else is nearly half-way finished. You haven't really started."

"I'm almost done," beams Elliot. Nathan shoots him a quick dagger look as he bends back to the task before him.

Nora moves over to Carla, checks her progress, and moves back behind Nathan. Trying to redeem himself, he holds up a cut-out from the worksheet and asks, "Is this a bell?"

"Yeah," responds Nora as she moves back toward Christy who is standing up.

"Short 'e'?" offers Nathan as she leaves.

Everyone is on-task five minutes into the exercise. Nora returns to Nathan's side and begins to help him cut out the worksheet. Elliot and Romeo gather around Nora to watch what she is doing. She glances at the clock and announces, "Finish up." She moves to the back of the room to help Rita.

In the space of seven minutes, Nora has now had contact with all the students in her class. With the exception of the interactions with Eric and Nathan, all of the contacts have been task-oriented. The task itself is a critical reading skills activity: Students are identifying vowel sounds in common words.

While almost everyone has finished, Christy is having difficulties. Nora sits on the edge of the table next to her and helps her sound out the words. "Queen. Listen. Queeeeeeen." Byron asks if he may work on the computer. Nora nods. He turns on the Apple IIc, inserts a diskette, and begins a math exercise involving the addition of single-digit numbers. After a few minutes, he gives up his seat to Rita who has been watching over his shoulder.

Other students have retrieved the "books" they have been making in Reading. Nora goes over to check Rita. She leans over the girl and explains the exercise briefly.

Elsewhere in the classroom, students are looking at books, finishing the worksheets, or watching Rita at the Apple. Nora wanders around quietly, her hands in her pockets. It's recess. The time is 10:30. The students have been involved in language arts activities for almost one hundred minutes.

The Poster Contest

Later that afternoon, when the students had left for home, we had another opportunity to talk as Nora prepared the classroom for the following day. As she busied herself straightening up desks, chairs, and tables, and searching for ditto masters, I asked her about her successes and failures as a teacher. Given Nora's strong academic focus in the classroom, I was somewhat surprised by what she considered one of her successes.

"One year I was teaching the third and fourth grades. Dena Air Service was having a contest and they announced it in their little newspaper called the 'Snowshoe Messenger.' They were offering prizes to students who made posters warning about the dangers of alcohol and smoking.

"So I clipped out the announcement and I brought it to class. I thought it would be a good project for the kids because there is so much alcoholism and smoking going around within the villages. I thought maybe they could get something worthwhile out of this and they'd start thinking about themselves. They see so much of it all around them."

Substance abuse is almost epidemic in some villages. The dangers are exacerbated by a hazardous environment. Every year, a number of deaths occur because judgment and skills are undermined by alcohol and other drugs.

"I came into class one morning and said to the kids, 'I found this clipping in the newspaper and I think it would be an exciting project for all of you to try and do. I think it would be kind of neat. Maybe some of you might win $100, $50, whatever. Some of you could be famous because your posters would be put up all over the place. I think that would be great because then you'd be showing your talent in art plus what you know about alcohol and smoking.' They were all excited. On the first four days of that week, we went over the habits of alcohol and smoking. We based our discussion on what was going on in the village — especially for alcohol because it seems that's the main problem in the villages.

"We wrote down all their ideas on the board and on the fourth day

I made them draw a sketch of what kind of posters they would make to enter the contest. They drew out a sketch. Then on the fifth day, from their sketch, they made their posters out of construction paper. They wrote on the posters what could happen to your body from smoking and drinking.

"That week was a busy week because we worked on it every day. You know how when you work on some projects they get kind of old after awhile? Every afternoon we'd work on it. We get out at 3 o'clock and we'd go from maybe 1 o'clock to 3 o'clock just working on ideas. Some would get a little frustrated, but then they'd go right back to it — just to get it out of the way. They all did a good job. They all really tried.

"Anyway, they were all neat posters. We had three judges to judge the posters — one of the teachers here at the school and two from the school board. They chose three posters from the fourteen that were submitted. Then those three were sent on to Dena Air Service. And one of my students from the third grade won $10 for fourth place. Another student from another class won second prize.

"The student from my class was really excited about it and all the kids were really happy for her. When she got the $10, she showed it to everybody here in the school. The whole school was really proud of her.

"We displayed all the posters in the gym that year and some of the parents were quite surprised to see what their kids can do in school. They were happy that we were doing something like this. They liked the messages the posters were supposed to get across.

"I liked it because it came from the kids. They used their own words. We worked on the ideas together, just jotting them down on the board. I didn't give them the answers. The ideas were all theirs. That's what they came up with. It made me feel good."

I also asked about frustrations that she had experienced in the classroom.

"I had a student who they tested and said was learning disabled. But I still had to teach her to read. I made cards, games, tried everything — working with her one-on-one, putting a teacher's aide with her, looking for different materials. I went to the Special Ed resource room to talk to the teacher and look for materials.

"I told her what I'd tried and what I was doing. She gave me some ideas about what to work on — like letter sounds, especially ending sounds. She give me ideas about ways to do it. So I came back to the classroom and tried those ideas. Sometimes they worked but sometimes they didn't. I had to keep going back to her to get more information on how to deal with this student. And I was always trying to encourage the student. . . ."

She is visibly upset, not looking up as she talks. Her voice is soft with disappointment and discouragement.

"I know all these kids pretty well. I always tell them they can do it because I know that they can. It's just sitting down and working with her. Don't let her give up, that's the main thing. Because if you let her give up, she'll always have a burden on her. Like you see some of these kids around here —" she looks up, out through the windows toward the spruce-covered hillside where most of the villagers live — "some of those who are just kinda hanging out. Someone let them give up. I don't want that to happen. So you just got to keep pushing and pushing. If she doesn't get it this year, then the next year you try again. You have parent conferences and try to get the parents to help her, to work with her at home. I sent a lot of work home with her. I kept her at school after class to do extra work. That's how I go about it."

I asked her if she thinks this is the advantage she has over teachers who come to the village from outside.

"Yeah, we" — here she's referring to herself and the teacher in the classroom next to hers who was also born and raised in the village — "know the kids. We'll push 'em where others might not. We know we can get more out of them than they might show others."

I also asked how she involves parents.

"I tell them, 'This is what you should do with her at home and this is how you should be helping her.' And I show them just what they should do. Instead of just saying, like a lot of parents do, 'O.K., do this worksheet your teacher sent home,' I explain to them that they have to sit down and work with her. I tell them, 'Everything you do with her has got to be orderly and you need to talk to her.' Some parents will do it and some won't.

"We made progress but I felt at the end of the year I just hadn't been successful with this student. Although she learned, she's not up to the other groups where I want her to be. That just bugs me."

An Expert Teacher in Any Setting

Before I went to observe and interview Nora, I read a study completed several years ago that focused on her and two other Athabaskan teachers. The researchers had videotaped the teachers and measured their rhythmic interactions with their students. The researchers concluded that at least part of the success of Nora and the other teachers resulted from their innate capacity to "tune-in" rhythmically to their students.

Counting myself among the rhythmically impaired, I cannot speak of the accuracy or inaccuracy of such an analysis. I wonder, however, if Nora's effectiveness is due to any substantial degree to such a relatively unconscious quality. My discussions with her about her teaching, my observations of her classroom, and my own analysis of her teaching behavior on videotape all indicate that this woman puts a great deal of conscious thought, imagination, and effort into her teaching. Nora is, I believe, a model of good teaching because of what she does — her planning, decision making, and so on — rather than who she is.

While her familiarity with her students, the reputation for excellence and hard work that she enjoys, her rhythmic compatibility, and her use of village dialect in teaching difficult skills and concepts are all elements critical to her effectiveness, Nora brings to bear knowledge and skills that she has acquired through study, reflection, and experience. If familiarity with students, good reputation, and rhythmic and linguistic compatibility alone accounted for Nora's effectiveness, all Native teachers would be equally effective. Such is not the case. Among Native teachers we find the same range of effectiveness that we find in the general population of teachers.

Observing Nora in the classroom and talking with her about her teaching, I began to distinguish those elements of her effectiveness which are independent of her ethnicity: Her careful preparations for instruction; her "choreographing" of each activity; her up-to-the-moment knowledge of where each student is in acquiring the skills, knowledge, behaviors and values she thinks important; her ability to keep students' attention focused on the task at hand without being an ogre; her repertoire of ideas and activities; her command of both her students' respect and their affection; her awareness of her children's experience outside of school; her frequent informal communications with parents — represent skills, knowledge, and dispositions she has consciously cultured. Her body of professional knowledge has, in turn, overarching academic purposes: To assist students to read with comprehension, to write standard English, and to calculate with accuracy.

Nora believes that students who have these skills will esteem themselves as learners and, ultimately, will increase their options for the future. Nowhere was this clearer than in the story she told of the girl whose learning disability frustrated her teacher's every effort to teach her to read with comprehension.

At the same time, Nora doesn't stray far from her teachers' manuals. As a student teacher, she worked with a cooperating teacher who was herself strongly wedded to the teachers' manuals in reading, language arts, and arithmetic. I could find no evidence that Nora had seen or knew of approaches to teaching comprehension, decoding, or word attack skills other than those she encountered in student teaching or through her manuals.

Nonetheless, I sensed that Nora would welcome opportunities to think and learn more about the teaching of reading. During my visit, we talked at length about a problem that we shared: Primary students who can decode text perfectly well but have difficulty constructing meaning from the text. The professional isolation and the sheer busyness of teaching in rural Alaska inhibit the dialogue that teachers such as Nora crave about problems that are common to all teachers, Native or non-Native.

Despite her apparent reluctance to stray from the teachers' manual and her isolation from colleagues, Nora's students, year in and year out, learn critical reading, language, and math skills. They also learn that school involves serious but rewarding work. And, finally, each of them learns that he is capable of learning.

Compared to the log house that was Our Ladies of the Snow School, the Kalkano School is another world. The lessons that Nora's students learn are not, however, so different from those she herself learned from that stern Sister of St. Ann: Read, work hard, respect yourself and where you come from, and, regardless of what you do, make something of yourself.

MATT

Basketball Wars

"Nothing makes me madder," said the luncheon speaker, "than to hear a person say, 'I am nothing but a teacher.'" The speaker leaned over the podium and thrust an accusing stare at the teachers and school board members assembled below. The audience — teachers and administrators — avoided his gaze and chewed their breast of chicken smothered in dill sauce.

"What we need," the speaker declared, "are stories about teachers who are heroes! I would like to hear just once — just one time — about a teacher who was FIRED for standing up for academic standards he believed in." The speaker paused and looked down. "I've never heard that story."

I'd like to tell you that story. It's a tale about a high school teacher in a remote Alaska village. He fought a battle over basketball and he stood up — for academic standards and for basic courtesy. The superintendent tried to fire him. But Matt was too canny for him. He didn't get fired. He got exiled to a beaten up trailer school in a remote and dreary corner of the superintendent's realm. He got exiled to a problem community, the district hot spot. Two years later Matt returned, his mettle tested, his powers proven, his armor gleaming.

When I think about Matt, I think about knights and dragons, Jason and Hercules, High Noon and the Gunfight at the OK Corral. But Matt himself cuts a modest figure — short and stocky with faded flannel shirts and paint-stained jeans. He teaches mathematics and science to about forty Yup'ik and Caucasian students in a small rural high school.

Matt is a personage at the school. He has a "rep" — the teacher who stands up for academic standards. But he is also a jokester. The elementary students like him because he can make his ears wiggle. When Matt pulls his ear, a wide-eyed second grader confided, his tooth falls out. I asked Matt about that. He pulled his ear, and, verily, his tooth fell out. "The kids don't know it's a false tooth," he grinned.

The principal wanders into this classroom to ask his judgments on administrative matters — like whether or not to cut short the school day for Winter Carnival. Matt heads the grievance committee for the local NEA chapter. Now and then colleagues come into his classroom to talk about teaching — why the fifth graders aren't catching on to long division and what can be done about it. New teachers at the school call Matt an influence on them; he keeps them from getting too lax. Even his great foe in the basketball wars, the superintendent, admires Matt's teaching and speaks of him with respect.

Matt demands respect. Most teachers allow students to call them by their first names — this is rural Alaska. Matt asks the students to call him, "Mr. Lambeck." Matt demands respect for the activity of education. Nothing comes before this — not even King Basketball.

The Battle Over Basketball

The battle over basketball has neither a beginning nor an end. In a small town like Red River, no event starts fresh. Every event is another arena for playing out relationships — feuds and alliances, scores to be settled. "Everything gets so involved here," complained a teacher new to Red River. "You get angry at a person in one role, and they take revenge in another."

The basketball game between Red River students and faculty is as good a place as any to start this story.

An annual affair, the basketball game is a good-humored contest. Teachers and students race around the court, clowning, taking shots, and kidding each other. On this occasion, the student selling tickets sauntered over to the basketball coach to ask a question.

"What are we charging for admission?" he asked innocently.

"Don't ask me that question!" exploded the coach. "Don't ever ask me a question before the start of a game. It breaks my concentration." He muttered about "someone not doing his job."

In a small town, "someone" is not hard to identify. "Someone" was Matt. As athletic director, he was in charge of ticket sales.

Reasoning that the coach was new to town and didn't understand how things worked in a small high school, Matt visited the coach's classroom the next day to explain things.

"Andrew was supposed to collect the entrance fee," Matt explained. "But he wasn't able to make it so he asked Oscar to do it. Oscar didn't know how much to charge. By rights, Oscar should have asked me as athletic director, not you. But in Red River everyone is used to just asking whoever happens to be around. It was only a student-faculty game."

Matt's explanation did not satisfy the coach. Dealing with entrance fees, he insisted, wasn't the coach's job. To win a game, he had to focus his mind totally on that game.

When the coach voiced other complaints, the students carried the news back to Matt. According to the coach, because "someone" again was not doing his job, the basketball team had too few games scheduled for the year.

Matt visited the coach again. Patiently, he explained that last year's athletic director, who had set up the basketball schedule, had sent the paperwork to the central office. Somehow, during the summer, the paperwork disappeared. Matt had to call up every village in the area to reconstruct the original schedule. He couldn't make commitments for new games until he learned what games they had already committed to. Many villages had only one telephone, which was often out of order. Matt had to leave messages and wait for people to call him back.

Although the coach seemed to accept this explanation, Matt soon learned that the coach was complaining to the principal about the basketball schedule.

Matt went back to the coach and handed him a sheaf of papers. "Obviously you don't feel that I'm doing the job," he said. "You and I don't seem to be getting along. All the materials are here, and the job is all yours."

The coach replied that Matt was doing a great job. But Matt later heard that the coach was still complaining. Matt went to the principal, and they agreed that, while Matt would continue as athletic director, the principal would deal with the coach.

Hostilities now shifted to the academic front. The teachers had set up eligibility rules: A student had to have a C average with no F's to play basketball. In Matt's class, some basketball players were failing mathematics. The coach was now muttering that "someone" didn't like athletics and didn't want his boys to play. The coach's accusation infuriated Matt. A star athlete in high school, Matt had tried sliding through with D's. But his high school coach had kept an eye on him and pushed him to do his schoolwork.

Matt's own success in athletics convinced him of their relative unimportance. "It was important at the time," he said, "but as a carryover to life, it led to nothing. I don't play football any more, and I don't run track any more. What good did it do me?"

Pressure built up on a small group of Red River teachers who were failing basketball players. The American History teacher, Mr. Crawford, changed textbooks to make things easier for them. Despite this, some of the basketball players refused to do the work anyway.

Over the teachers' protests, the superintendent decided to change the rules — any student with passing grades the previous year was eligible to play basketball during the current year.

Amidst this controversy, a new problem emerged. The basketball team was walloping other teams by scores like 120 to 27. The teachers let the coach know that such humiliations were not appropriate. The coach, according to rumor, told his boys not to reveal their score when they returned to Red River after away games.

A player, Bill, told his father, Mr. Crawford, that the coach had threatened to kick anyone off the team who revealed the score. Other basketball players accused Bill of lying. The coach, they said, had only told them not to brag about the score.

Matt had had enough — and he stood up. He publicly opposed renewing the coach's contract, resigned as athletic director, and called into question what the school was all about. Not only was the academic purpose of the school at stake but the school risked its viability for developing character. The coach, he charged, was teaching students to lie.

The principal called Matt into his office and put two papers on the desk before him. One was a standard teacher evaluation form. Matt had received positive ratings except in five categories that were curiously blank. The second paper was a memorandum. Reading it, Matt learned he had a negative attitude and his resignation as athletic director left the principal with the burden of the work.

"You're a good teacher," the principal began. "You know your stuff. You have good rapport with the kids, but you do not follow district policy and procedure."

"Name one time that I didn't," Matt demanded.

"You weren't happy," said the principal, "when the basketball rules were changed."

"You want a robot," Matt replied, "and I'm not a robot. I was not happy with it, and I never will be happy with it. You want a happy robot."

The principal told Matt to read the memorandum.

"What you're saying to me," Matt said, putting down the memorandum, "is that, if I'll go back and be the athletic director, this won't appear in my file. If I don't go back, it will."

"I'm not saying that exactly," replied the principal.

"I'm not going to work for the basketball program the way it is now," Matt said. "You do what you have to do."

Shortly after this exchange, Mr. Crawford got into an altercation with Jake, one of the basketball players in his class. As is often the case, who was most at fault was unclear.

The principal, indicating his support of the pro-basketball faction in the school district, suspended Mr. Crawford. As chairman of the teachers' grievance committee, Matt came to Crawford's defense.

For championing Crawford's cause and opposing the principal and superintendent, Matt got his punishment. Five minutes before five o'clock, on the last day on which teachers could be transferred, Matt was headed toward the gym to referee a women's basketball game when he met the superintendent.

"Do you plan to come back next year?" the superintendent asked.

"Yes, I do," said Matt.

"Good," said the superintendent. "We need you in Demon Lake."

"Maybe you misunderstood what I was saying," Matt replied. "I'm not planning to go to Demon Lake. I'm planning to come back here."

"You're involuntarily transferred," announced the superintendent as he walked off.

Matt protested his transfer through the arbitration process. The arbitrator decided that the district had a right to transfer teachers where they were needed, and Demon Lake needed a mathematics teacher. The students protested his transfer. The mayor, who had a son in his class, called a community meeting to air the issue. The students said he was a great teacher, that he set a standard. Other people stood up for him.

"Sorry, kids," said the president of the school board at the end of the meeting. "He's got to go."

That summer, Matt and his family pondered their future. Matt knew the superintendent wanted him to quit. All the other combatants in that year's basketball wars — the principal, the basketball coach, the Crawfords — had left the district. Matt and his family were evicted from their trailer home. When his wife shopped at the store, other shoppers sometimes refused to look at her.

"I kept telling Matt," his wife told me, "you are standing up, but it's not only you who pays the price for it. Your family pays the price.

"I was on an emotional rollercoaster that year. I'd cry. We had no money. We bought a tent and tried to live in it with the children that summer. That didn't work. Then we bought a camper and drove around the state. One day I would say, 'Yes, we're going back and we're not going to let them lick us.' The next day I'd cry and say I didn't want to go back."

Matt and his family did return — to Demon Lake. The basketball wars raged on. Years later, after Matt had returned to Red River, the issues were still alive, the subject of thought and debate.

The Battle Over Basketball Continued

"Matt is just so naive," a colleague remarked some years after his exile to Demon Lake. "He believes that right is right and wrong is wrong. That's just not the way it is out here.

"Matt was right about the basketball team and the way the basketball players were turning into a mini-Mafia. But that wasn't the issue. The issue was authority and control. Matt was challenging the principal's authority. And it was a union thing. The school board thought the teacher's union was trying to run the district. Also, Matt should have kept his distance from the Crawford case. Matt is so naive. Even if he was the chairman of the grievance committee, he should have stayed away and let Crawford do the talking.

"I was chairman of the grievance committee myself, but I played it differently. I knew there was an anti-teacher mood in the community. So I went down and drank coffee with the superintendent. I played good ole' boy and admired the Confederate flag hanging in his office. I always got things worked out. You drink coffee and you compromise."

The years haven't changed Matt's views. "You pay a price when you stand up. It was a hardship on my family. But I would do it again. There's a point where you have to ask yourself: Can you live with yourself if you don't do something? Some people told me to just let the year go and get by. But if no one protested, the coach would be coming back. Maybe I lost the battle over basketball, but I won the war. I won for all the teachers.

"My wife is still paranoid about my getting involved. But my family is safer now. The superintendent is not going to send me anywhere again. He's not going to send any teacher anywhere. There hasn't been another involuntary transfer in this district since mine.

"The superintendent knows that if he transfers another teacher for political reasons we will go to the wall. Even though he won that time, it exacted a toll out of him. You could see that his eyes were red and bulging. He smoked more cigarettes. Sure, he's got the right to transfer a teacher and he has the might. But if you're afraid to do anything, the right and might aren't worth much."

The basketball wars flared up again when Matt returned to Red River. This time Matt was pitted against the principal, a subtle and experienced man. One of the star basketball players was failing Matt's chemistry class. According to the eligibility rules, students receiving F's could not play basketball.

The principal walked into Matt's classroom and asked, "Can't we come to some compromise?"

"It's better for kids to know that there are rules and not that, if they cry enough, the rules will slide," Matt insisted. "Every year we go through this little turmoil, and someone allows them to play. The kids need to know that there are set rules."

"Does this boy need to be in your class at all?" asked the principal.

"Certainly," Matt replied. "He's a senior. He has taken all my other science courses and done average work or better. This year he's just not doing the work."

The boy didn't play that quarter. Rumors circulated that next quarter he would play; the principal would fix it.

When the new quarter arrived, the boy was still ineligible; he had received an F from Matt the quarter before.

The principal sent out a memorandum on eligibility. Matt pulled it out of the file where he carefully kept every memorandum circulated in the school. The principal had written:

"If a student is ineligible, he or she may not participate in any athletic competition, be it practice, games, gym nights, or city recreational nights unless a letter has been signed by the teacher in the subject area in which the student is ineligible which clearly states a student has rectified his or her ineligibility problem."

The memorandum continued: "I view eligibility problems as being a day by day situational condition. It is not hereditary. It should not be carried from quarter to quarter unless current work is failing.

"There is a point in which eligibility rules can stifle incentives. It is this point that I am most concerned about. I am not saying that we apply situational ethics to all eligibility considerations, but I am saying we should take the holistic perspective before we declare a student ineligible for work not done in past quarters or summer sessions."

That Saturday, when Red River played its traditional rival, the failing student was on the basketball court.

This time Matt didn't protest. The principal was the man who had brought him back to Red River from his exile in Demon Lake. His only recourse was to go over the principal's head to the superintendent and that action would only alienate the principal. When the students asked Matt about why the boy failing chemistry was eligible to play, Matt replied, "I only work here." Matt looked at the lay of the land . . . and decided not to act.

Years of Exile

A factionalized community, Demon Lake was a source of constant problems for the central office.

An air strip — the village's link to the outside world — a liquor store, and a few cabins between rolling hills and the river, this was the town. It had once been a thriving mining community. Now few of the hundred or so residents still mined. Most residents were Caucasians, some of whom had married Natives from the region. People lived on what they could rake together from hunting and trapping, government assistance programs, and part-time work at the school or health clinic. Yet this small, bucolic community regularly got rid of its teachers.

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Matt told me, was the best source of advice available for dealing with a community like Demon Lake. According to Machiavelli, leaders must: "learn the nature of the land, how steep the mountains are, how the valleys debouch, where the plains lie, and understand the nature of rivers and swamps. To all this he should devote great attention."

Matt paid great attention to the lay of the land.

Two families, Matt soon realized, dominated the town. One rented space to the telephone company, the clinic, the post office, and the television station. The other family owned the grocery and liquor stores and the air service. The first family controlled communications: As the telephone office was in their home, they were privy to all calls. The second controlled transportation: They flew everyone in and out of town.

In the tradition of powerful families sharing the same turf, the families feuded. Teachers at the school invariably got embroiled in this feud. "What was interesting," Matt pointed out, "was that both of the families would be arguing with each other, but, if you said anything against one of them, the other family would back them up and get mad at you."

Although he foreswore entanglement in village feuds, Matt found his neutrality threatened. The school and its facilities were frequently arenas of conflict. Once, for instance, a miner, to satisfy his girlfriend's desire to watch television, tapped into the school generator. Having previously warned the miner, Matt told the maintenance man to cut the splice.

The miner paid Matt a visit.

"I hear you got a bone to pick with me," challenged the miner, his heavy body shaking with anger.

"Not really," Matt replied coolly. "If the school district said you could buy electricity, that would be fine with me. But I'm just the caretaker up here. I can't say 'yea' or 'nay.'"

When the miner started yelling, Matt side-stepped. "Look, if it was up to me, I'd let you have the electricity. The school isn't dragging down the generator enough anyway. But it's not my choice. It's not personal, Andrew, I'm just a caretaker here. That's my job and I'm going to do my job."

When the miner left, he and Matt were still on speaking terms.

Most years the factions fought over whether or not to keep the teachers. After his first year, both factions agreed that Matt should stay. He didn't align himself with one or the other feuding families. He visited people. He bought potatoes and hired babysitters and paid fairly. He spent some of his salary in the community rather than ordering everything from Anchorage. The community wanted a traditional, structured school program to prepare their children for college. Matt gave parents what they wanted. They liked the way he set down clear rules and communicated these to the parents. People liked his emphasis on mathematics and science — subjects previously neglected. One student who had a reputation for being difficult developed a close relationship with Matt. His parents credited Matt for interesting their son in academics.

During their time in Demon Lake, Matt, his wife, and four children lived in a 70 ft. by 12 ft. trailer. The ceiling was torn out and hanging down; the roof leaked; the septic system didn't work. The trailer was so small that their children couldn't bring friends over to play. Skiing and snowmachining were about the only activities available.

Teaching at Demon Lake, Matt estimates, involved five times as much work as did teaching in Red River. His students ranged from the 6th through the 12th grade level. The class fluctuated in size from seven to twelve students, depending on who was living with their family and who had left to live with a parent or relative elsewhere.

Each period of the day, Matt conducted several different courses at the same time. During the English period, he taught students at the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th grades. In social studies, he'd have to deal with Eastern history for the 6th grader, Latin American history for the 7th grader, Alaska history for the high school students, and American history for one student who had already taken Alaska history. After school, he was responsible for basketball, volleyball, cross-country running, and cross-country skiing. To prepare for class each evening, he delved into 25 different textbooks.

Student defiance, not this workload, turned out to be Matt's most challenging problem in Demon Lake. The previous high school teacher had developed a crush on one of the girls, chasing her around the trailer trying to kiss her. One of the students went to see the superintendent during a trip to Red River and told him what was going on.

The superintendent flew to Demon Lake the next day and fired the teacher after the student who reported the incident agreed to make a sworn affidavit. A correspondence teacher took over for the last two months, but he left as soon as he could. He put his son, a non-certified teacher not much older than the students, in charge. His son used a willow switch to establish order — and was soon gone himself.

After these events, Demon Lake students were feeling their oats. Hadn't they gotten one teacher fired and run off two others? They challenged Matt from Day One. In a town like Demon Lake, if you back down from a challenge, you may as well catch the next plane out.

On the first day of school in the 22 ft. by 8 ft. trailer that was the classroom, William, one of the students, announced, "Teachers are here for our enjoyment."

"Well, the times they are a'changing," replied Matt easily. After writing a list of athletic activities on the board, he invited the class to choose the activities they'd like for the year.

"We don't want to do any of those," said William.

"Well, I'm not forcing you to do a sport," replied Matt. "If you care to do these things, we can do them. If you don't, we don't have to."

Two days later William approached him. "Mr. Lambeck, we've decided we're going to play basketball, and you can be the coach."

"Let's put it this way, William. If we have a basketball team, I will be the coach," replied Matt.

"Well, she's not playing," said William, gesturing toward the only girl in the high school.

"If she doesn't play basketball, you're not playing either," Matt said. "We're a class here. We're together. This is a school, and she has the same rights you have. That's the way it's going to be."

The next challenge to Matt's authority took place after school. A ninth-grade boy was shooting baskets on the play deck outside the classroom. As Matt watched from the trailer, the boy, apparently unprovoked, hurled the basketball at a six-year-old. The ball smashed the child in the face, and blood spurted from his nose.

Matt rushed out and picked up the six-year-old. "Just what do you think you're doing?" he asked the ninth grader.

"I'm not doing nothing, and I don't have to listen to you," he replied.

Matt grabbed the boy. "Look, you are not going to talk to me that way. I'm not going to put up with that. There's no way I'm going to put up with that."

Matt marched the boy to the principal. The ninth-grader was the principal's son. He told his father that the six-year-old had made a face at him. His father told the boy that he was going to give him a licking.

William had watched the scene from the trailer. "I would have smashed that little kid in the face, too," he bragged to Matt.

Knowing the territory as he did, Matt had a context for the incident. The ninth grader was the brother of the girl that the previous teacher had chased around the trailer. The six-year-old was the dismissed teacher's son. Matt decided to sit his students down for a discussion of the previous year's events.

"Do you think the teacher's kids understand what happened last year?" Matt asked his class.

The students said that the kids probably didn't understand.

"That's what I'm trying to get across to you," Matt said. "You're trying to do things to them to get back at their father. If you don't like their father, that's fine. Maybe he doesn't deserve that you should like him. But you shouldn't take it out on these children — they're innocent."

After this discussion, students began to settle down. That first year they continued to test Matt. They stopped to get snacks at the store, for example, when they were supposed to be doing cross-country skiing. The next day they did calisthenics rather than skiing. Matt laid down clear rules and consequences. Work time was work time, he insisted, and play time was play time. By the second year, the students followed Matt's routines.

Matt's two years at Demon Lake were two years of peace for the central office. During his tenure at the school, the central office did not have to intervene at all.

Despite his success at Demon Lake, Matt and his family wanted to return to Red River. When the principal in Red River pressed the superintendent to bring him back, the superintendent initially refused. When the science position opened up the next year, the principal of Red River sent only one name to the central office. This time, the superintendent relented.

Return to Red River

When I met Matt, he was back in Red River. I had come to Red River to consider him for a University of Alaska study of effective rural teachers. The superintendent of the school district, the principal of the high school, and several teachers from the region had all nominated him for the study.

I wanted to find out what his students and the local community thought about him. While most Red River students were Yup'ik, most also came from intermarried families. When I talked to them informally about good teachers, Matt's name came up frequently. To be more systematic, I randomly selected nine students to interview. When I asked them who their best teacher was, six named Matt. Students told me that they liked Matt because he gave clear explanations: "He's the best teacher I ever had. He's a good explainer. Like he reads the material over to us after we read it. That really helps us out a lot. Before the test he reads it to us again."

Students also liked the way he brightened up the classroom with puns and jokes: "Mr. Lambeck — he always tells jokes. He's funny. He makes you feel like you belong there. If you're feeling bum, he'll prop you up with a funny joke. When we were studying skeletons, he'll say something like, 'Make no bones about it'. . . . He said if we won the subregional game, he'd shave off his beard. We won. He let us watch him do it and take pictures. It was so funny."

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Students stressed that he was there to help when they needed it. To help students individually, he came to school early in the morning and stayed after school. He started a study hall from 6:00 to 8:00 on Saturday evening for students who had fallen behind.

Most of the comments about Matt from the local school board members were also positive. A few community members charged that he was "too political." A few also complained about the summer school he held the first year he returned from exile. According to them, Matt was just trying to show off. . . . or get support for the teachers' union. According to Matt, the summer school was academically necessary. Matt discovered, on his return, that the previous teacher had put students who complained that Algebra I was too hard into a General Mathematics course. These students were unprepared for some of the material in Algebra II.

Matt had established clear and concrete expectations for students who wanted to pass Algebra II: They had to complete one page a day. At the end of the school year, almost half the students hadn't completed the required work. Feeling their slow progress wasn't entirely their fault, Matt didn't want to fail them. They hadn't, on the other hand, done the work needed to pass. He consequently gave these students "incompletes" and helped them make up missing work in an impromptu summer school.

During the middle of the summer, Matt came to school for two hours every afternoon to help out students with incompletes. Of the 20 students, 13 finished their work.

The Craftsman in the Classroom

When I saw Matt in the classroom, I wasn't prepared for his style. I saw no localized curriculum, no flashy teaching techniques, no instructional innovation. Matt, at first, seemed to resemble the type of textbook-bound teacher who gets a bad press in some of the educational literature. He goes through the book, chapter by chapter, and does the activities recommended in the teacher's guide. He is also the kind of teacher that other teachers hope their students had the year before — a teacher who makes sure students leave his class with a solid grounding in the subject.

Matt is a meticulous craftsman. In every subject, he thinks through exactly what his students need to understand. He works with his students in a methodical, sometimes plodding manner, until they understand. Matt is absorbed with teaching, with the fine points of the craft. Matt talked for hours about exactly how to reorganize the fragmented mathematics and science curriculum he found on his return to Red River. With intensity he talked about his five 7th graders who couldn't master long division, no matter how many times he went over it; whether to individualize learning; which students to allow to go ahead on their own, which to group into pairs, and which to keep with the whole group. Other rural teachers I interviewed at Red River seemed to give these matters little thought. Some Red River teachers could not even remember the names of the textbooks they used.

After a day of watching Matt teach, I began to understand why Yup'ik students say his teaching is so clear. Sitting in his classroom, I began to understand scientific concepts that had never before been clear to me. "Eureka!" I said to myself during one physical science class, "so that's why a light goes on when you turn on a switch. Turning on a switch completes a circuit." Matt had presented the students and me with a helpful metaphor. "A circuit," he said, "is nothing but a circle." He drew a circle in the air.

Matt's teaching looks straightforward and simple — follow the textbook, explain the concepts, have students do experiments or mathematics problems, test their knowledge, make them re-do work until they master it. Only after I analyzed his teaching on videotape did I begin to appreciate its complexity. Matt combines many of the precepts of the effective schooling literature with the precepts of the anthropology and education literature. He emphasizes direct, whole-group instruction. Only more mature or advanced students do individualized work. He emphasizes high time-on-task. Classes start as the bell rings, and students work throughout the period. He enforces a few clear rules: Be in class before the bell rings; work without interruption; don't ask to go to the bathroom in the middle of class; don't eat in class. His expectations are not only high but also clear and concrete. In mathematics, for example, high expectations means completing a page a day. Students who fall behind get an "incomplete."

At the same time, Matt is aware of Yup'ik students' distinctive communication styles and adapts classroom instruction accordingly. Instead of insisting that students give individual answers in front of the entire group, Matt accepts choral responses. As he says, "A lot of them are so shy. I've learned it just works better to let them call out the answers." He also pays particular attention to nonverbal signals — "You can see it in their eyes when they don't understand." He avoids spotlighting students with personal criticism or praise. Viewing the videotapes reveals that Matt virtually never offers public praise. He reserves such personal remarks for private occasions, such as comments on students' papers.

Matt emphasizes subject matter knowledge but he constantly makes connections between academic knowledge and the students' background knowledge. "Cultural relevance" in Matt's classroom is not achieved by discarding the standard academic curriculum and substituting for it "culturally relevant" content. "Cultural relevance" is achieved by linking the concepts in the standard academic curriculum to the objects of everyday rural life — guns, flashlights, snowmachines, Christmas tree lights, house wiring and breaker switches. Local objects provide Matt with the examples to represent scientific concepts.

The Physical Science Classroom

Matt's 9th grade physical science classroom illustrates this melding of effective schooling and cultural adaptation techniques.

As the students came into the room, I kept my eye on Matthew. He had walked in to his previous class ten minutes after the bell rang. Mr. Andrews, the teacher, had said nothing at all. Matthew arrived in Matt's classroom before the bell rang, but he slipped back out into the hall.

Matt finished taking attendance as the sound of the bell died away. He looked at Matthew sliding into his seat.

"That will be five minutes after school," he said.

"I was here before! And the bell hadn't stopped ringing," Matthew protested.

"Come on, Matthew," Matt said. "It's the end of the year now. You know the rule. You have to be in your seat before the bell rings."

"Yeah, you know the rule," said the boy next to Matthew. Another student nodded. Ignoring them, Matt told the students to open up their textbooks to the page on electricity. A problem Matt confronts is that most of the students in this class do not read well enough to understand the Silver Burdett physical science textbook. Producing his own materials is unrealistic given the number of preparations he has. Throwing out the textbook and relying entirely on local materials would disadvantage those students who may go on to college where they will need to know how to read a science textbook.

Rather than throwing out the textbook and developing his own material, Matt has developed a two-pronged strategy. First, he uses the textbook as an outline for teaching the class. He opens the textbook, glances down at it to see what the topic is, explains the concepts using local examples, and discusses the material with the class. Having built his own home in Red River, Matt has a rich repertoire of examples in physical science.

Second, as he goes through the textbook, Matt models how to read a science textbook and guides students through the difficult reading. As he goes through the textbook, he makes such comments as "Look at the 'objectives' at the head of the chapter. That's what they want you to learn."

He points out important material in the textbook and shows students exactly how to make sense of diagrams. As he teaches science, Matt also teaches reading.

Matt organizes the subject matter into a three-stage sequence. He repeats this three-stage sequence throughout the period:

1. Preview a small chunk of the text and its concepts.
2. Explain the concepts in this chunk of the text by linking them to students' everyday experience with the physical world.
3. Check for understanding by seeing if students on their own can apply the textbook concepts to the physical world they know.

Matt begins this class by previewing types of electrical circuits. He immediately places electrical circuits in a familiar framework: "We use electricity all the time and we take it for granted. The only time we don't take it for granted is when, like this winter, our power supply went off and then everybody realizes how much they really rely on it. It runs your forced-air furnace. You use it for fans and refrigerators. Your water is pumped by electricity. So we need to take a look at it and see some of the basics of it.

"On the first page, page 241, your text talks about electrical circuits. An electrical circuit means the current has to go from the source of electricity — in our case it'd be David's power plant — to your home and then it has to go back. So a circuit has to do with a circle. It has to complete a round trip." Matt draws a wide circle in the air.

"A closed circuit is one where all the parts are there, and the circle is complete. An open circuit is where a section of the circle is broken. We do this all the time and we don't even think about it. It's just like using our light switches."

Matt walks over to the light switch by the door. He puts his hand on the switch.

"Right now, we have a closed circuit. It makes a circuit all the way in a circle. It is traveling at the speed of light. It comes from David's power plant, runs through this light here, and then runs around and goes back to David's power plant."

Matt dramatically turns off the light switch and plunges the classroom into darkness.

"Now all I've done is to make a break in the wire. I've opened the circuit. That is all switches are. They make a break in the wire that stops the electricity on one side of the switch and doesn't let it flow through to the other side of the switch."

The students' eyes have not left Matt. A boy at the front begins to frame a question.

"Why doesn't it all ball up into. . . ?" He gives up.

Matt knows the territory and understands the misconception behind the boy's question. He is wondering why, when the circuit is open, the electricity does not back up like water and overflow the wire. Matt seizes upon a familiar example — the river jammed up with ice, a frequent springtime occurrence in Red River. He uses this example to clarify the difference between the flow of electrons and the flow of a liquid.

At this point, Matt wants to see if students have understood the concepts he has presented so he knows whether to repeat or to proceed. He does not quiz the students by posing questions that simply ask students to repeat what he just taught. Rather, he asks higher order questions that require students to apply the basic concept — how circuits are created and broken — to familiar circumstances.

"Can you think of places in your home other than switches that we use to break circuits?"

"A light bulb?"

Matt does not say whether the answer is right or wrong. He figures how to make some use of the student's idea — talking about how a light bulb could break a circuit. He repeats the question.

"A switch?"

Matt makes no indication that his question had specifically excluded this answer. He comments on the student's answer and asks for other examples.

A girl draws in the air and asks, "What do you call those . . . I don't know if that's what you're talking about."

"I think it is," Matt responds.

"I don't know what you call them . . . it's one of those that when you push down it stops. . . ."

Matt nods and expands upon her answer.

"Okay, it's usually called a knife switch. When you pull on the handle, it pulls the metal out from between the other pieces of the metal and breaks the circuit."

Matt asks students to identify other things in their houses that break circuits. Finally one boy comes up with the answer Matt has been waiting for — fuses. Matt gives no sign that this is the "right" answer. His assessment of students' understanding has been so subtle that students don't even realize it is occurring. The lesson is low-key, comfortably paced, and task-driven.

Matt is a master of metaphor — the analogy that bridges new material and known material. His teaching abounds with metaphors: The friction of electrons crowding through a narrow filament is likened to the friction a roomful of students would create if they all tried to rush through a narrow classroom door.

Matt uses the three-wheeler — the common carriage of the realm in Red River — to illustrate simple machines. He uses the recoil of a rifle and the way a person is thrown when a snowmachine stops to illustrate Newtonian laws of physics. "Students snap back and get kind of interested," Matt observed, "when you talk about things that are practical around here."

Matt's use of familiar illustrations to teach academic concepts does more than clarify the textbook. It also creates a reason for learning textbook concepts that makes sense to rural students. Understanding electricity in Matt's classroom means understanding how your Walkman works and why you put batteries on top of each other in your flashlight, and why you'd better get out the aluminum wiring in your trailer if you don't want a fire. Matt sees teaching physical science as a means of giving students more control over their immediate physical world. For students in rural villages, knowing how things work is a critical aspect of adult competence.

A Country Boy Makes Good in the Country

Matt's own experiences as a student give him insight into his students in Red River.

During his elementary years, he struggled in school. He repeated a grade. He recalls his fear and embarrassment at not knowing what was going on: "I remember sitting in classes where all of a sudden the instructor would suddenly jump up to a point and you are sitting there and you are lost. And if you are afraid to ask questions . . . then you sit there. The rest of the conversation is meaningless because you've lost the whole train of it."

Matt is quick to perceive his students' difficulties because he had similar difficulties: "I did that with Gloria the other day. I could see it on her face. I was explaining something, and I said, 'Does that make sense? Does everybody understand?' She didn't really say, 'No, I don't understand.' She just made a little slight movement. . . ."

One reason he explains subjects clearly, he believes, is that academic work is hard for him. "I probably know where they are going to get confused because I know where I got confused."

A poor reader, he had the same problem in school that many of his Yup'ik students now have — just reading words without realizing they are supposed to be getting meaning. Matt can recall the particular school experience that made him realize that reading words is not the same as reading for meaning. This insight did not come to Matt until high school.

"We had a history teacher, an elderly lady. She would ask for comments on the history chapter, and start discussing it and I'd say to myself, 'I read that book, and that's not in there' . . . Then I went home and I re-read what she had talked about. Everything she said was in the book! I had read it and I had gotten nothing out of it. I came to the realization that I was reading words. Pretty soon I figured out that reading did not mean plodding through pages. I got involved in the class. It was her and me in a dialogue."

Matt's own problems in school strongly influenced his approach to teaching in Red River. He is exceptionally sensitive to signs that students are not understanding the material, to reading problems, to feelings of fear and failure, and to other difficulties not so apparent to teachers for whom school came easily.

Like many Red River students, Matt wandered around after high school. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He went to a community college just to try something. A 1.5 grade point average and a shortage of funds led him to drop out in his second year. He took a job in a paper mill. Not until he had married did he try college again. Then, he worked hard, going to college during the day and working nights as a school custodian.

Before Matt became a teacher, he held eighteen different jobs: driving a garbage truck, doing construction, cutting diseased trees, working in a plastics factory, fixing farm equipment. This broad base of experience helps him make academic subjects interesting for his students.

Matt's experience of drifting around after high school also left him with a confident view of the purpose of rural education. Unlike many rural teachers, Matt is not perplexed by the question: Why am I teaching Algebra II or chemistry to rural students, most of whom will not go on to college? Matt's answer to this question derives from his own life experience: "I kind of look at myself. I went to college a year after I got out of high school. I worked for a year in a transmission factory, went to college, dropped out, and eight years later I went back. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I first went. I was just kind of floating around and fumbling. But a few years later I knew two things. I liked to deal with people and kids and I liked animals and biology. I combined the two and became a biology teacher."

When Red River students ask why they should study algebra or biology, Matt has a response: "I say to them, 'I don't know what you want to be and what you want to become. You may not know now. But some day down the road you may decide to do a job that requires you have a math background, and you've got a good start on it. You can spring off. What we're trying to give you is a broad base, a jumping off point.'"

Matt takes a long-term view. Most Red River students do not go on to college, and those few who do rarely graduate. Still, a high school education, Matt believes, will make them more competent adults. As parents, his students will provide better educational support for the next generation.

Matt sees his own career as a teacher as a significant achievement. Teaching represents, for him, an income and status better than his own parents. He owns land and a house in Red River. He has the respect of his students, his colleagues, and his principal. Professors from the university admire his teaching and use him as a model of an effective rural teacher. Even his chief adversary, the superintendent, is counted among his admirers. Not bad for a country boy.

Conclusion

Years ago anthropologists Murray Wax, Rosalie Wax and Robert Dumont made a provocative observation about the kinds of people who are effective teachers of Native American children. These teachers, they observed, are "real characters" in the old-fashioned sense of the term.

What is it about teachers such as Matt — "real characters" — that makes them especially effective with Native children? Perhaps the explanation is that "characters" like Matt can vividly communicate to culturally different students what they stand for and what they expect. Nothing is ambiguous in Matt's classroom. Expectations, rules, standards, and boundaries are clear. Students feel comfortable and safe. They do not face an uncertain teacher who is unsure about how to work with culturally diverse students.

Matt Lambeck stands up for academic principle, but he chooses his battles judiciously. He remembers Machiavelli's dictum: Know the territory. No other percept, Matt believes, is so helpful in village teaching. To be effective, rural teachers must know the political configuration of the community and the school district. They must know what is happening to students outside of the classroom. They must know students' backgrounds so they can connect academic subjects with students' experience. This detailed knowledge of the lay of the land enables Matt Lambeck to stand up for academic standards — and survive.

HANNAH

Hannah was worried. Strands of her brown hair streamed in the wind as she sped toward campus. The six youngsters in Hannah's multigrade elementary class were alone for the first time in the city.

Olinka, Hannah's aide, had pooped out six miles into the bike tour. Hannah had shepherded her students back to the dormitory and instructed them to "stay off of the street" until she returned with Olinka.

"I didn't feel good about it but I thought, being bush kids, they're independent, they do a lot of things on their own. I know they can handle being alone; they can handle most problems. But this was a foreign place to them, and they'd never dealt with cars like the cars in Anchorage.

"I hurried back and picked up Olinka and was just within sight of the dorm parking lot when a car came barreling by us. Then I saw Peter, one of my second graders, pull out of the parking lot and into the main road. I screamed! The car hit Peter head on, and Peter went flying. I slammed on the brakes, jumped out, and ran to Peter. I helped him up. 'Peter!! Are you all right?' He said 'Yes,' his stock answer to anything you ask him. I checked him over, but he was more interested in his bike. The car hadn't hit him. It was the bike that had been crunched. I asked him to stand up and walk around and I felt his legs. He wasn't in pain.

"Peter is real accident prone," Hannah adds by way of explanation. "In school he usually has a couple of holes in him. He always survives.

"About this time the guys from the other car come running up to us, two high school boys as pale as ghosts. I said, 'Peter, do you know why it was wrong?' He said, 'Yes.' Then I asked the boys who had been in the car, 'Do you know what you did wrong?' They said, 'Yeah.' And I decided not to bother calling the police. 'I think your lesson's learned. I hope you'll bear this in mind for any other time.'"

"Their voices were shaky when they thanked me, apologized, and departed, very, very slowly. We picked up the bike and I just couldn't see belaboring this thing with Peter. All the other kids were on him — they were giving him a hard time. Olinka was giving him a hard time, and

I just figured, drop it, we're okay now. They have learned, and I didn't mention it again."

Risk-Taking in Teaching

Hannah is stirring the dog food warming on the wood stove as she tells me the story of Peter. She continues, summarizing the benefits of the class trip for her Athabaskan Indian students.

"They got a lot out of it. I remember how proud I was of them. They didn't know city ways. They had to do so many new things like being sociable and talking to people they don't know. They were diligent about keeping their journals. They all expressed great interest and enjoyment, and I know the trip will stay with them all of their life."

Hannah and the six elementary students from Sheldon worked throughout the year to prepare for the two-week April trip. With the money earned and the reservations made, teacher and students anxiously anticipated their upcoming adventure in Anchorage. Yet the first graders were also uncertain about their ability to cope with the urban world. To the students, Anchorage was an unknown place, rumored to have paved streets, speeding cars, buildings to the sky with elevators, and television! To Hannah, shepherding her students to Anchorage, however nerve wracking or exhaustive, was just another part of her job. The kids needed to experience, to grow, to be ready for second grade — and life.

Hannah believes in taking risks. Life is a succession of challenges — both personal and professional. Accepting challenges and taking the associated risks are, for Hannah, essential for growth. The resulting growth in her students warranted such risks.

As she hoisted the 45 lb. bucket of pungent, steaming dog food off the stove, she declined my offer of help with a friendly, "Stay put, it will just take a few minutes."

Hannah and her dog team . . . I remembered a February visit to Sheldon three years past. Hannah had taken me for my first Alaskan dog sled ride on a cold, moonlit evening. She was completely in control of the dogs as we glided over frozen lakes and choppy tundra paths. Three and a half years later, after many puppies, several first place finishes and countless hours of training, Hannah was selling her team.

Outside, the howling from the dog lot had subsided. Hannah returned, her nose wrinkled in distaste, "One thing I won't miss is smelly dog food in my house!" She began raising and running sled dogs her first year in Sheldon — as if teaching in a multigraded classroom was not challenge enough.

"I knew I could teach and handle the class well," she replied. "I guess the dogs really provided a challenge," she paused, "and a release from school work."

"How did you actually get started with dogs?" I asked.

"Well," Hannah began, "there were lots of dogs in town that fall, but none were being run. I was given some dogs and was really determined to learn the art.

"So there I was out there struggling with my five newly donated dogs. Nothing worked. Jim and Eve Wagner, my teaching partners, beginning their third year in Sheldon, kind of filled me in. 'You don't just go out and ask for something, you talk around it — this is the Athabaskan way. You talk around something and if they want to help you they will. But you never confront them with it.'"

"So I kept saying, 'Yeah, I want to learn how to run dogs. I want to learn how to run dogs' and no one was saying, 'Well, here, let me help you.' So I finally went out and tried it myself. People were peeking from behind windows and around houses; there were lots of snickers, of course. But it just didn't work. So I put everything away, and quit for the day. The next day my kids came out to help me. They were laughing and still nothing worked. Now the people were standing outside and watching. The third day, finally, the men came out, and one man told me what to do.

"I got on a three-wheeler and I told the dogs to go. The dogs ran around and were jumping all over me. Then they put a kid on the three-wheeler and told me to run. If I ran, my dogs would follow. It worked! People were cheering and all excited. That kind of broke the ice. So after that people started checking on me, and the men would stop over and talk about mushing and tell me this and that. The older women in town would talk to me about when they had run dogs. From then on, things got more and more close.

"The first two years I had so much to learn, I just absorbed anything they would share with me. We always talked dogs. I didn't know anything that first year, and little more the second year. But by the end of that second year they were asking me questions about dogs — you know, 'What do you do for this? How do you do that?' That's when we started racing. It was great!"

Hannah shows her sure enthusiasm and pride when she talks about her class — six kids in grades 1 - 6. These were the kids that worked so hard to get to Anchorage. These were the kids that helped Hannah tackle dogs. These were the kids that learned with Hannah in school every day.

Challenges. Risks. They are an integral part of Hannah's being. She had conquered the task of starting a sled dog team from scratch and transforming it into a racing team, a competitive team that she was now selling for a handsome price.

I suspected there might be another challenge on the horizon. I was right.

"Flying," she beamed. "I just bought a plane."

"And you haven't even taken ground school?" I blurted.

"Oh, I'll get through that. I had a chance to buy this 170 Taildragger (an early model Cessna with the control wheel in the rear), and I've always wanted to learn to fly. So I'm selling my dogs and starting my flight training."

All the while, Hannah teaches elementary kids and is recognized by colleagues, parents, administrators and students as an excellent teacher — one of the best in the interior of Alaska. The willingness to take risks that characterizes Hannah's personal life finds its way into her teaching.

The saga of Jeremiah illustrates how Hannah takes risks to create learning situations for her students.

"I tried to keep the classroom challenging and fun. The kids were into everything that was active. Science was big, and we always had pets in class. At the end of the second year we lost one and I asked the kids to pick a new one. They selected a dinosaur, a snake, or a skunk. The village had told me they would kill a snake if I brought one into the room, a dinosaur was impossible, so that left a skunk."

A skunk in rural Alaska. Hannah promised her six kids that somehow over the summer she would come up with a skunk for the class pet. The students had enjoyed a good year, Hannah's dogs were the talk of the town, and now the word was out that a polecat would be in residence in the fall. Little did Hannah know that she was in for another of her patented professional challenges.

Hannah purchased a baby skunk that summer in Florida. A veterinarian and the pet store owner assured Hannah that skunk immigration to Alaska was no problem.

"The skunk, Jer, and I got to Anchorage. Two days later I went to buy a larger cage. The guy at the pet shop asked me what it was for and I said for a skunk and he told me they were illegal in Alaska. So I called Fish and Game.

"'No way,' the director said. 'You have two options. You can kill it or ship it out of state.'

"I said that I wouldn't do that because of my kids in Sheldon.

"'No, you can't have it,' he repeated.

"'Well, I'm going to Sheldon in two days and I'm going to fight this so we better get it straightened out on the phone!'

"I asked him to reread the letter I had sent to Fish and Game which explained the academic and social rationale for a skunk in my class. These were going to be the first kids in the bush that had a skunk!

"I must have been on the phone to him for about forty-five minutes. He finally conceded, 'Well, let me talk to the other people in the office and I'll let you know tomorrow.' So he called me the next day at 8:00 a.m., and he said, 'Well, Hannah, I talked to the people in the office' and he paused. 'We've decided to grant you a special permit.' I was told that I was the only person in Alaska to have a special permit to have a skunk."

Four years later, Jer still rules the classroom. Now it's Chena, more kids and more commotion, but Jer's weathered well as the only "permitted" skunk in Alaska. Securing Jer for her class was . . . "No big deal," she recalled, "just the usual hassles involved with doing something a little unusual in my room."

An Activity-Centered Classroom

Unusual? Hannah's classroom is different from most in rural Alaska. The difference is Hannah.

Chena School. At 8:43, darkness blankets the school as students wander the halls, awaiting the 9:00 bell signaling the beginning of school. In Hannah's first grade classroom, the day is already underway.

"What question were we talking about?" Hands shoot up. "Eric," she says.

"What makes wind?" responds a dark-haired, serious looking boy.

"And who has an answer?"

A smile crosses Hannah's face as seven hands stretch for the ceiling.

"Millie."

"I asked my aunt and she said it was the mountains and clouds that make it."

Again, the hands reach for the ceiling.

"Clouds and mountains sure are a part of wind." A nod and smile for Amanda. "Now who else found something out? Wilma?"

"My dad's a pilot and he said wind comes from storms and bad weather."

"It certainly can, Wilma, and your dad ought to know a lot about that!" Wilma beams as Sandy's wagging arm is finally responded to. "Oh, Sandy, WHAT ELSE causes wind?" Sandy's red hair bounces as she speaks urgently:

"My mom and I looked it up in a book last night and it said it was caused by the earth."

Silence.

"What do you mean, Sandy, the earth?"

"The book said the earth turns, but I don't know why that causes wind." Laughter and giggles erupt as Hannah continues.

"Great work guys! And do you know what subject is going to tell us more about wind today?"

"Science!" shout no less than seven students.

It's 8:55. Five minutes before school begins, Hannah's first graders are already talking about science.

The students are busy when the 9:00 school bell sounds. No one seems to notice. Elizabeth proudly begins her duties as calendar marker. Ellie is preparing to take attendance. Benny and Charles are struggling with "ch" and "sh" from a workbook. Three other students are practicing addition on the board. Randy is petting Jeremiah the skunk who had briefly interrupted his spelling task. Hannah and Shelly run through a refresher on shoe tying.

Everyone is active, engaged. Hannah moves to the piano and strikes a four-note dragnet prelude "dum da dum dum." Talking ceases, workbooks close, students scurry to desks as, next to Hannah, Ellie is poised to perform her appointed duty.

By 9:15 the pledge is said, "America the Beautiful" sung, the attendance and calendar work completed, and the day's agenda reviewed.

"What's this?" asks Hannah, holding up a booklet entitled *Comprehensive Test for Basic Skills Manual.*

"MATH TEST!" comes the reply.

"Do you want to finish it now or wait until later? Talk it over." A minute of bubbly discussion ensues in preparation for the day's first vote.

"How many say now?" Twelve hands go up. "And later?" Two arms raise sheepishly. "Okay, you two can work in your workbooks and take it later." The two dissenters re-think their choice, approach Hannah, and ask to join the others who have cleared their desks.

"Okay, remember — noooo talking until we're finished," Hannah cautions while handing the answer sheets and test booklets to the suddenly silent students.

"Everyone open the book to page 22. Everyone has a pencil, scratch paper?" The kids are at the "gate;" all are ready. "This is the 'LAST' part so try to do your best."

Hannah patiently explains the sample questions and procedures, begins the test, and methodically circulates through the uneven rows of small desks. Two questions and a pencil lead in need of sharpening are all that interrupt the test taking.

9:40. The test is completed. The first graders cheer the idea of a quick round of "Simon Says" before the reading lesson.

"The first half hour is all getting ready. Most kids come in early. They are glad to be there. They have things to bubble about. That's the time when we do a couple of group activities — the opening activity," Hannah told me as we sat in her house later that day. "And then we sit down and I talk and they get to talk awhile. It's just talking time. And today the direction was science. There is a question asked the day before and they've got to think about it. The next day they come up with their answer and we'll discuss what they found. Then we'll tie the question to their book. Hard questions with easy answers. Seems to get them started. I think an enjoyable start can make or break the morning activities from before school through lunch time. And I figure it carries over a good bit in the afternoon."

Hannah's classroom is neatly organized into small clusters or activity centers. Students move into and out of these centers through the day. Each location in the room is associated with a specific activity. Math means seatwork. Reading means the small tables toward the kitchen area. Stories and flash cards occur in the couch and pillow area. Snacks are eaten beside the refrigerator. Power words are found in the corner where the walls are covered with progress charts. Daily student responsibilities are listed on the job board by the carpeted story and singing area where each day begins. Storage space for each student is under the bank of windows which extends the length of the room.

It took me a while to figure out the method and sequence of the day as kids were often scattered throughout the room. Although initially reminded of a glass-paned ant farm, I grew to appreciate the deep structure of Hannah's classroom. The students obviously enjoy and appreciate the environment and were clearly comfortable with the rules and expectations of the room. They have important choices and decisions to make each day. These choices and decisions require students to take responsibility for the pace and substance of their learning. "Part of what I'm doing with them is getting them ready for second grade."

"What is 'ready?'" I ask. Hannah deliberates as her dog team takes up a cacophonous howl outside.

"'Ready' means they are going to go on to second grade knowing that they can do whatever their teacher throws at them. And, if they can't do it, they are going to try until they get better at it. The confidence that accompanies being successful in my room is a major portion of what I mean by ready."

"And if they aren't 'ready'?" I ask.

"There's no way I could say to a kid, 'You have to get this far. There's no way that I'm going to accept anything less.' I expect them all to work. I'll tell them, 'Heh, you're not putting forth. I'm not going to accept this.' I will not pass them if they have not completed enough work to show me that they can handle what's in second grade. But I won't push them in a classroom past anything they can do or to a frustration level where they would never produce anything.

"Recently, there have been questions about Shelly. At the last child study team meeting, one member recommended that she be held back. But I just cannot accept that in her case. Shelly needs to be with her peers. There may be someone else that is just not ready socially. If they are not and they need more time to build confidence or to pick up skills, or they are so low that they are not going to be able to catch up with their peers next year — I will hold them back. But Shelly will never catch up. She's been diagnosed emotionally retarded. Shelly will always spend a good part of her school days in the resource room. Her time in the class needs to be positive and enjoyable with her peers.

"At the beginning of the year, my expectations of Shelly were low, low, low, low. But throughout the year, through what I have seen Trixie, the special education teacher, do with her and what I have seen Shelly do with the group, my expectations are much higher. These higher expectations are sometimes a cause for tears because any time Shelly is in a situation that is strange and tough on her, she has learned that crying will help her, protect her. When I firmly let her know that I am disappointed in her, there are often tears. She has to learn to deal with that. She will dry up in a second and go on. She's learning. She'll be ready."

Hannah, obviously tired after a day that has included teaching, working with her dogs, and answering the questions of an inquisitive visitor, ignores my suggestion to adjourn.

"I suppose my philosophy is to pick them up wherever they are and take them as far as they can go." Effective teaching for Hannah begins with knowing and believing in each of her students. While Hannah's classroom is fun for the kids, activities are driven, first and foremost, by the need to prepare them for second grade — step by challenging step.

Hannah told me another story that illustrates her purpose of getting students ready for the future.

"Alexander was his name, a kindergartener. I was walking out to the playground when I saw him spit on a teacher."

Hannah's indignation colors her cheeks as she recalls the incident.

"I grabbed that kid by the shoulder, I marched him in, I put him in my room and I asked him if he would like to be spit on. I didn't say it in nice terms because I was angry to see that done by anyone to anyone! He kind of said no. I asked him if he would do that to his mother, his father; he said no. I asked him what they would think if they heard he had done it. He didn't say. I said, 'Well, let's go tell your mom and see what she says.'

"So we went into the office. I called his mother and told her that Alexander had something to tell her. I put him on the phone and I let him tell his mother he spit on someone. After which I told his mother, 'I just wanted you to know what was going on in school. He's supposed to be in my room next year, if he graduates to first grade. I won't accept that in first grade. That's not proper behavior for any person, whether it's in school or outside.'

"The mother thanked me and after we hung up I told Alexander that we didn't need to talk about it anymore. I asked him if he thought he should say anything to the person he spit on. I said, 'It's up to you. You use your judgment. You're gonna deal with him in school.' That person walked in. I said, 'Do you have anything to say?' He stood there a while and he apologized. I just let it go and walked out."

While Hannah can be a taskmaster, she also believes students can enjoy learning in school.

"School has to be fun! If I can't have a good time at school, it's miserable for me and I don't see how they can enjoy it either. So I think there should be a lot of positive and pleasurable things, especially in the beginning years. I think there should be a lot of excitement, a lot of new things. I do a lot of the traditional things, but I also need some variety. I might go through workbooks for nine weeks and get sick of it and we'll switch to something else which is completely different. I guess I have to be in charge. I like to be the one that calls the ups and downs. But I also can't stand it if everyone's always in their seats, quiet the whole time.

"Kids have got to be able to explore and be active. I don't have to be there with them. Like once, I got an old record player. When they finished their work I said, 'I want you to take this thing apart and figure out what's in it.' So they didn't worry about me; they didn't ask me for things to do; they went back there and operated on the 'patient.'

"They found the magnet, which led to a lengthy discussion on magnets. They were trying to figure out what different parts did. I told them that I was going to have them put it back together again after they took it apart but unfortunately I waited too long. They were smashing things to see what was inside so we never were able to reassemble the poor old machine. They have a sense of discovery on their own at that age that's just great. You start them and they'll keep going."

Central to this lively classroom is Hannah's relationship with each student. Before coming to Chena she spent three years in Sheldon, a village of ninety people. In her multigrade classroom of six students, relations were very informal.

"We were very much like a family. We knew exactly what was happening with each other and actually had a 'pecking order' in our group. It seemed like we were always together. The kids would run dogs with me. They'd feed dogs with me. They'd come to my house for overnights. I'd play with them on the swings, just hang out with them. The village was small and everyone lived so close. It's just part of daily living to have the kids always around. I'd go to a home to visit and I was bound to have a student at the home."

Drawing on other experiences, Hannah spoke more about the need to know your students. Her years with Yup'ik children reinforced this conviction.

"I think it's really important that you learn a little bit about the culture before you try to adapt. I know that when I taught in an Eskimo area, they talked with their eyes a lot. You talk to them and you think they're not responding but those eyebrows are going up. It wasn't until I learned that raised eyebrows mean 'yes' that I understood what they were saying. You have to pick up some of the cultural awareness before you can deal with them effectively. You've got to watch and listen.

"When I moved to my next school the students were Athabaskan. They'd ask me a question and my eyebrows would go up and no one understood me. I realized it was different. It is so important to really become acquainted with your kids and their environments. I don't see how anyone can teach without this."

Studies of class size and tutorial instruction clearly identify a primary benefit of smaller classes to be positive and increased student-teacher interaction. Many teachers in Alaska choose rural locations to have the opportunity to work with smaller classes. Hannah's motivation comes form a desire to develop trusting relationships among and with her students and to make learning a cooperative venture.

From the first day, she expects her students to participate in decision making. She also uses these decision-making occasions to observe her students' academic skills. Closely bound to Hannah's desire to engender trust and cooperative learning is her emphasis on expanding youngsters' horizons. This seems particularly critical for the often isolated rural student. When I asked for examples of how Hannah incorporates these goals into her teaching, she replied.

"We get out!"

'Getting out' means adventure. Her class trip to Anchorage exemplifies this adventurous spirit.

"Some of the kids had never been to a city. For the entire year before we went, we studied city living, city signs, survival in the city. We incorporated it into all of our subjects. We learned about jobs. We talked about how you eat in the city, how you shop for food. I tried to relate what their village was like to what it was like in the city.

"The kids earned a lot of money baking and selling bread and felt the trip was their own. We left in April on our two-week trip. We just did everything possible in Anchorage. We went to businesses. We tried all the different types of ethnic restaurants. We went to banks to see what they did with their money. We went to grocery stores where the kids planned meals and picked all the fruits and vegetables. They ate avocados and papayas and other things they had heard about but had never tried."

Hannah's voice is pitched with excitement from an adventure now four years past as she continues, "Part of the time we stayed in someone's home that had TVs in every other room. Sheldon had no television at the time. Kids had their own bedrooms — another first for the kids. Then we stayed in the dorms so they saw what a university was like. Then we stayed at a hotel. It was just perfect."

Each day was a thrill for the students. They could shower whenever they liked. They saw banks with stacks of money and vaults as big as Sheldon houses. They went to libraries to check out books, bought pastries at bakeries, visited the telephone company to make their first long distance call home, took swimming lessons, went bowling, got haircuts and ate all kinds of food — from McDonald's to Japanese sushi.

Hannah remembers one dinner in particular.

"We went to a pizza place on Northern Lights Boulevard one of our first nights out. The kids didn't say anything, they were just all eyes. They didn't make any noise, just filed into our booth. Then, as they became more comfortable they started talking with each other, saying 'Look at that' and asking questions. Lots of questions, wanting to know what was going on. The waiter told the manager that there was a strange little group of kids out there with a couple of adults. Soon a Greek man came out and sat down and talked to the kids and responded to their questions. Before he was summoned back to the kitchen he gave them key chains and thanked them for coming. When the meal was over we talked about tips and how much we should leave. They voted for big ones! As we left I saw three or four of the kids walk over to the manager and say 'Thank you.' He shook their hands and was real formal. He didn't treat them like kids."

The Development of Hannah's Worldview: Teaching as Risk-Taking and Challenge

Other trips have followed that first trip to Anchorage. Hannah strongly believes in travel and out-of-school learning. Her belief that the existence of banana peels shouldn't stop you from taking a walk allows her to see problems as risks, risks as challenges, and challenges as the raison d'etre of her life. Meeting challenges are the mileposts of her growth. The early challenges to not conform and fit into "neat little socially acceptable groups" provided Hannah with an opportunity to exert and test her emerging sense of independence.

"I didn't want to be the same or be one of the crowd. I remember in high school, I guess, when the Beatles were popular. There were a couple of times when all my friends wanted to go to a Beatles' concert and I refused to go. It just looked stupid to me to sit there yelling and screaming and crying. I just thought, 'I don't want to be what everyone else is.'

"I liked to do things that were different, like I hung out with the drama group. In the summer I didn't spend time in the city." Hannah is from a town near New York City.

"I would work at camps for handicapped kids or some other type of job so I could travel.

"Then when school was over I didn't know what I wanted to do, but my parents wanted me to go to college. It was expected. That's what you did. We didn't have much money and I hadn't earned a scholarship. I had to look at places that were feasible. I selected and was accepted at three schools. It was down to a decision of whether I wanted to go where my brother had gone or to a small rural school where I knew no one or where my boyfriend was. I decided I didn't want to be compared with my brother, I didn't want to be near the boyfriend anymore, so I picked the one out in the country, the little rural school, La Boca State College.

"When I was a kid, I always tried to do what my brother did. He was the big brother and I didn't want him to out-do me. He had majored in forestry. So I had considered starting out in that when I went. Then I realized that I wasn't into all the biology so I decided to major in Spanish. I stuck with Spanish for two years but then decided I didn't like that either.

"So . . . then I went into teaching. Yet just general teaching didn't make sense to me. I started hearing about Special Ed. They have a real good Special Ed program at La Boca. I began noticing a lot of the handicapped kids there I had worked with at handicapped camps. I realized that Special Ed was a little different from regular teaching so I enrolled. Soon after I learned that I could get dual certification for elementary and Special Ed at the same time so I followed through with that."

Hannah's previous experiences with handicapped kids at summer camps provided a foundation she believes helped her meet the challenge of working with exceptional students.

"When I was in high school and during my first two years of college I worked at YMCA camps. Then, once I started college I saw an application for a handicapped camp on Lake Erie. I just applied out of the blue and I got a job as the art director. I went up there for a summer and really enjoyed it. The following summers I went to Camp Lake Hatchett, Maryland — it's right beside Camp Sherman and it's with the Humanski League of Handicapped Children and Adults. I worked there as a program director. Between these summer experiences and my coursework at La Boca, I really began to look forward to teaching exceptional kids."

Distant shores provided an interlude for Hannah following college.

"My home town had offered me a teaching job but I just wasn't ready to jump into that kind of permanence. So I decided to go to Europe and travel and perhaps see if I could get a job that way. My parents couldn't understand this. They could never understand my going away in the summers or my independence.

"Once during the college years I went to the Dominican Republic. I decided I'd just earn enough money myself in a summer and at the end of the summer, go. My folks couldn't understand it, but once I showed them I was going to do it, they supported me. So, the same thing with going to Europe, it was like, 'What are you doing? That's not right.' Yet I worked hard that summer and once the money was together and I had my passport, they realized that I was going to go.

"I traveled for three months. About Christmas time I was running out of money and was in Greece. I had met people who lived in Germany and encouraged me to look for work there. But there were no teaching jobs. I finally got work with the military at a service club. I was the tours director. I took it. It was great. After six months I decided to return and teach that following year."

Hannah was back in the U.S. but still not ready for the hometown teaching job. She opted for an environmental education school for inner-city youth in Steese.

"It was a new ESEA federally-funded outdoor education program. The Steese Public Schools had hired a director who hired a staff of three teachers the first year. None of us really knew what to do. We set up a program and recruited inner-city kids. We brought them out to our program in the mountains. Each group of twenty kids came for three days, fall through spring. We climbed mountains, hiked, examined animal and plant life, took orienteering training, and lots of other Outward Bound-types of activities. We focused on cooperative activities as most of these kids were headed toward integrated middle schools. It was going great! I learned so much about kids and out-of-school learning that first year."

"The second year we hired some additional staff and the third year it was really a good program but by then I was getting bored with it. It had become routine and I knew I could continue to do it well but was really ready for something new."

When I asked Hannah if new was synonymous with challenge, she smiled and said, "Alaska." Following a succession of unreturned letters and phone calls to state agencies and urban school districts, Hannah learned of the Alaska State Operated School System. At that time, SOS was being replaced by the Rural Education Attendance Areas.

"All of a sudden I started getting application forms and calls from everywhere, saying, 'Can you come up for an interview? Can you do this?' The Nanook School District called me. I told them I'd call them when I arrived in Anchorage.

"When I got to Anchorage I called Nanook and discovered the superintendent was coming in the following day. He met me at the Westward Hilton Hotel. I wore a skirt, heels, nylons. I tried to put on the perfect image. I don't know what he thought when I first walked in. He had on jeans and a sweater. He talked to me for a half an hour. I had not even taught Special Ed and the job I was being interviewed for was the coordinator for Special Ed for the school district, responsible for seven schools, training aides, working with teachers — lots of itinerant travel.

"'You sure you can handle this?' the superintendent asked me.

"'Oh, yeah.'

"'What are you going to do out there all by yourself?'

"'Oh, I'm sure I'll find things to do.'

"So he told me I was hired. That was my second day in the state. I told him I needed a week to get things together and then I went out."

After spending a couple of days in Hannah's classroom, I had developed a pretty good idea of the schedule, learned most of her kids' and dogs' names, and figured out how to haul sixty-pound bags of dog food on her new Yamaha snowmachine. I could not picture this woman in jeans and boots decked out in nylons, heels and a skirt! Hannah's warm blue eyes, strong and well-conditioned frame, and endless energy signaled a love and commitment to the life she now had.

She continued the story of her arrival in rural Alaska.

"The superintendent did not know anything about Special Ed. The teacher who had done everything had resigned. No one in the office knew what to do. They didn't know anything about the budget. They didn't know any of the rules or the regs. So it was like, 'Eek! We need someone to fill this.' Maybe they thought I was green enough so I wouldn't act rashly. They gave me all the records. I was in control of a budget which exceeded $100,000. I went when and where I pleased. I was in Juneau for meetings. I brought in consultants as I needed them. They never questioned anything I did. But I don't know if I always did the right thing. I was so naive that year.

"You know, I had never even taught in a classroom and here I was servicing seven villages, telling the teachers what they should be doing with the kids. It was a real eye-opener. I remember that first year. I'd get home and just cry, 'cause I didn't know if what I was doing was right. I really needed help but none was available.

"Then, that year another Special Ed teacher I hired to work under me had to be relieved of his job. Everything was done under the table without telling me. I didn't even know the circumstances until it was done. I flared up then and went to the assistant superintendent and said, 'Either I'm in charge of everything or I'm not in charge of anything!'

"I didn't get anything from him but 'uh, uh, uh,' so then I went to the school committee. I talked to the chairperson of the regional board and told him, 'Either I'm in charge or I'm not.' I said, 'I've had it. Either I know what's going on or else I'll leave now.' And it was like, 'No, no, we want you in charge.' From then on that was settled.

"That whole first year I felt really bad. It took twelve candy bars when I'd get home at night just to get me through. But by the end of the year I liked the kids I had and I knew I could be better the next year. And it hadn't been a total failure. I had accomplished some things. I was a hard worker, even if I didn't know much. I worked real hard with the kids — especially those in Shelak where I lived. I think I was accepted.

"The second year I did a real good job. But I also had an audit that year which made me nervous because I hadn't worked with the federal auditors before. It went okay but reminded me that I still hadn't had a chance to do what I really was most interested in — having my own classroom — knowing what's going on the whole time — being in control. That's when I went to Sheldon."

"Five years in education and never a chance at your own classroom," I wondered aloud.

"Yes, except for student teaching. But I'm so lucky that I did go the way I did. I don't think I ever would have had as much success or confidence in the classroom unless I'd had that chance to travel in Nanook. I gathered a wealth of information from teachers and schools from all over the state. I saw some excellent teachers, and I saw some really poor teachers. But I learned from every one of them. And it helped me decide what I wanted to be. When I went into a classroom, I was ready."

Another year, another challenge for Hannah Pruitt: Sheldon, one of nine villages in the Denali School District. This small upriver Yakotna village of ninety inhabitants was to represent the beginning of Hannah's teaching career.

"I wanted Denali. I had met the secondary teachers, whom I really liked. The district sent me out for an interview and Jim and Eve met me and I spent the day with them. They walked me around the village and introduced me to the kids and their families. That evening we had a Community School Committee meeting. Most of the village came and we sat in a large circle. I was at the front of the circle and they asked me, 'Do you smoke?' I said, 'Yes.' 'Do you drink?' I said, 'Yes, do you?' They kind of chortled.

"They asked me if I taught Special Ed and I said, 'Yes.' Then they asked me if I planned on running dogs and I said that I was bringing three dogs up and that I hoped to learn.

"Then the chairperson says, 'I don't care if we hire you.' The next one says, 'I don't care.' The next one says, 'I don't care.' And it went on around. Finally the chairperson concluded, 'Well, we do things a certain way here. Sometimes we expect you to just look and listen but don't say anything. If you think you can do that, you're hired.' I said, 'Okay, I'm willing to learn from you if you'll let me work with the kids and let them learn from me.' He says, 'Okay, you're hired.' And that was it."

Hannah got Sheldon and Sheldon got Hannah with her Special Ed background, nontraditional teaching experiences, administrative experiences, and confidence. Hannah was hired, in part, because she convinced the school committee that she would watch, listen, and learn.

Hannah's first house in Sheldon was an old, tilting three-room log cabin with an inefficient wood stove. I visited Hannah there during that first winter and can testify to the cold, rustic nature of that abode. Did it bother her? Not much. She spent most of her time that year at school and with her dogs.

The multigraded classroom setting provided Hannah with an opportunity to blend her skills, knowledge, personal qualities, beliefs, and experiences.

"The kids and I had worked real hard. In the school it was always like a family. The older kids were in our room and we were in their room a lot. The younger kids were always looked at as the babies, and the older kids proved to be a great instructional resource. We just started the year at ground zero. I spent time getting to know the kids and finding out what they could do. One first grader, two second graders, one third grader, two fifth graders, and one in the sixth . . . We all learned together and helped each other."

Hannah's tenure in Sheldon and Apiat coupled with earlier experiences in nontraditional teaching settings had profoundly influenced her present instruction style. She felt her first grade Chena classroom was much better because of her previous challenges.

Developing Independence in Students

Another morning was moving quickly in Hannah's first grade classroom. With the achievement test behind them, the students are absorbed with individual language arts assignments that are listed on the board. Hannah seats herself at a table shaped like half of a Yin/Yang symbol.

"Huskies," she calls out. Five kids close workbooks, place pencils in desks and grab their reading books on the way to the table. Reading groups have begun. No children except the "Huskies" even look up from their work.

"Kids have to learn to work independently. Seventy-five percent of our work in this class requires the kids to be independent — it's the only way I can really stay on top of the class — and good for them as well."

Independent tasks do not necessarily imply that students aren't interacting. Hannah considers interactions over subject matter vital to learning.

"Pretty much no matter what they're doing they're always beside each other BS'ing. The only time that I ask them not to talk to each other is when we have a spelling quiz or test."

Spot checks of student learning throughout the day and daily homework assignments are routine, enabling Hannah to remain academically in touch with each student.

"Each day we go over the written material. And I keep up. I check all their papers every night, so thev get it back the next day to correct it if there's anything wrong. Knowing exactly where each kid is can be tough. You just feel it. You know when the kids are clicking and you know when they aren't. Basically I guess it's one-on-one working with them and checking their work — what they have to put down on paper every day. I also have every child read, whether it's in a group or alone.

"If there are problems, then I make sure I get to it the next day and then the following day to observe the change in what we talked about. It's a daily thing. As far as grades go, I often trust my intuition better than the actual marks I've recorded. I'm really a subjective evaluator in that I feel pretty confident about knowing about where my kids are."

Such intuitions rarely get much attention in studies of teaching. Hannah can anticipate when her students "click." Words such as "click," "feel," and "know" rarely can be specified and counted but are undeniably critical to teachers' decisions about what to do next.

Throughout the day the students move about the room either in small groups or individually and complete their tasks. Some of these small groups involve Shelly whose special education status requires an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

"Shelly has been diagnosed as mentally retarded. She's markedly different from anyone else in the room. The room takes care of her. And I think it's developed here just like it would in Sheldon. But it's a little more difficult here because Chena's much bigger. There are people here who don't know Shelly, and are not aware of her condition. But in our class we really try to take care of each other."

I want to pursue the subject of Shelly. Shelly certainly appears comfortable in the room. The other students are comfortable working with her.

"At the beginning of the year I negotiated with the resource teacher regarding Shelly's IEP and schedule. She spends a couple of hours upstairs in the resource room getting one-on-one attention. The remainder of the day is with us.

"At the beginning of the year there were comments like 'Why isn't Shelly doing this?' We sat down, with Shelly present, and I said, 'Shelly's different. Shelly can't do everything as easily as us. It takes a long time.' I explained, 'I don't have all the time to give to Shelly so you're going to have to help me.' I think they've accepted that. There are times when they get sick of Shelly and tell her to get lost or stop or leave or whatever, but there are also times when I'll say, 'I can't get to Shelly. Would you work with her on this or check with her, see what she's doing?' and the kids always help and seem to understand. Shelly appears to be very comfortable with this arrangement. Next year she'll go on to second grade with these guys and the relationship will continue."

Hannah makes it all look easy. While she admits to long hours of preparation, her successfully mainstreaming a handicapped student in her classroom is impressive.

Hannah's Special Education training obviously helps.

"I think my Special Ed training allows me to deal with Shelly the same way that I'd deal with anyone else. I think special ed has helped me to see how I deal with each kid. Shelly's problems are real easy to identify but the other kids have problems, too."

I was picking up how Hannah teaches, manages diversity in her classroom, and relates to kids. The mystique of this woman, however, remained unexplained.

A mentor? No — never had one.

"I think I was attracted to any professor that was enthusiastic and had a lot of humor. Anyone that I could laugh with and feel comfortable with in making things enjoyable — those are the people that attracted me. Those are the people I relate to best.

"I think to do your best you need to feel good. I know for myself that if I don't feel a lot of pressure on myself, then I'm comfortable with what I'm doing and going to enjoy it and probably do a lot better. I believe that's the way it needs to be in school.

"It doesn't eliminate pressure though. I do give some pressure in the classroom and that was a Maria Kob influence." Professor Kob teaches Special Education courses at the University of Alaska where Hannah has taken some classes. "She basically dealt with Learning Disabilities. But you know, one of her statements was that kids need pressure and they need to learn how to work under pressure. Not threats but positive pressure.

"Like the time tests. Did you see how they went at those? I often wonder, 'Is that a right thing to do in first grade?' But they love it."

I asked her to tell me more about Professor Kob. "I saw her as hyperactive — she never sat still. I like that attitude. And everything she talked about with kids involved activity. It wasn't just sitting and having the kids sit. I learned from her but I couldn't call her a mentor."

This seems to trigger in Hannah a reflection on her social self.

"I realize that I'm more of a solitary person than a social person. I have several friends that I like to be with at times, but I still stick mostly to myself. I've always been like that."

The door opens, and Bess, the principal, steps in. "Fluoride time." Hannah smiles as the kids file out and the atmosphere of the room abruptly changes. I thought of other teachers I had observed who met similar interruptions with far less than a smile.

"Sure they interrupt our routine, but that doesn't bother me. We just go with them. Like for the spelling bee. Kids didn't know what a spelling bee was, so instead of having spelling one day, we went to watch the older kids practice. The health people come twice a year to do fluoride with the kids. Interruptions are good things. I can get so sick of the routine and the kids do too. We'll take a break anytime and it's fine."

The break affords me the opportunity to ask a few quick questions about the morning's activity. I ask about standardized tests — a controversial topic in rural Alaska.

"I liked the last one we used — the Metropolitan. The reading was tough, but they just loved the science. The CTBS doesn't have any of that.

"The results won't come back until next year so it's no benefit to me. It'll be useful to the future teacher. I'll look at the kindergarten scores. But they won't mean much and they're not really that valuable. I had one kid whom I know is a little star, and he wasn't in the mood to take a test. Half of his answers were 'Well, I'll put this down and get it over with.' So you can look at them for a quick idea but I wouldn't count on them too much."

Managing an Activity-Based Classroom

I am also curious about how she manages student behavior.

"I expect them to treat everyone as an equal and with proper manners. I try to say 'no loud noise,' but I'm usually the noisiest one. We set up ground rules at the beginning of the year. I'll have them make the rules and we'll put them up. Sometimes during the year they need to be changed. I try to make them think about what they're doing to someone else. Like I'll say, 'How'd you like that done to you?' and they'll say 'No' and I'll say, 'Well, let's make it a rule in here that we don't.' "About this time of the year if they do something that I don't like, it's 'Knock it off,' 'Don't do it,' 'Be quiet.' I'm to the point where this time of the year I'm bossing. If something doesn't meet my fancy, I let them know. If I act pretty weird, they feel comfortable telling me I'm acting weird and we work it out."

I haven't noticed "weird" behavior on Hannah's part, but I take her word for it.

"When kids achieve, how do you reward them?"

"This year it's stickers!" Hannah's voice cracked like the Wicked Witch of the West. "'Do we get stickers today?' It's terrible, isn't it?" She shakes her head.

"I tell them if I'm proud of them. I think I use a lot of praise in the classroom, when they do something really well. Other times I just don't say anything. We just go along and they praise themselves and I figure that's fine. So it just depends on my mood. I try to let them know when they're doing well. But if they're happy and I'm happy I don't feel we have to gloat over it.

"We just keep going. If they're doing something wrong, sometimes I just make a small note of it. If others need to be aware of what's being done wrong, it'll be public. If it's something that's just a mistake or concerns one child, I'll take them aside or put it to them when no one else is noticing."

I ask if she uses the same reward for all her students.

"No, I think different kids need different rewards. I mean, the stickers go for everybody. Actually, it's appalling don't you think? 'Would you like two stickers today?'" The Wicked Witch voice cackles.

"I cannot believe it. I ordered all these stickers. I have the smelly ones, and now I'm into holidays this year. A lot of our content and activities go with the holidays. So I have Christmas stickers, and Halloween stickers, and all this garbage, and they love them. People are making millions of dollars on stickers."

While the fluoride treatments continue, I ask Hannah about the school discipline policy.

"I think there's one written down, but I've never followed it or introduced it to the first graders. I suppose I'm fortunate that we deal with all of that right here in class. It's only gone to the point where I've called up parents once to let them know their son might be on the way home within the near future, and I got the A-OK. He straightened up."

What about those students that fall behind? "We keep plugging along. Sometimes we'll try different things. Sometimes I turn them over to another student and I'll tell them, 'I'm stuck, what are we going to do?' so that it's not just me. And often, another child will come up with a trick that will help him. They'll have the patience where I have lost it.

"It seems like discipline problems are closely related to a teacher's patience. Another thing I'll do is call home and let the parent know what we're lacking. Sometimes just working at home can help. Other times it doesn't, so we just keep plugging along. It really depends on the situation and who the kid is."

The door flew open and sixteen freshly fluorided first graders come buzzing back into the classroom.

"Let's clean up and get ready for lunch," orders their teacher.

Desks are cleared, books replaced, chairs reordered, and finally — snowsuits, coats, hats, gloves and boots are donned. The noon bell rings and the line of first graders streams down the hall and explodes out the door for their brisk trips home for lunch.

We grab our coats and jump on Hannah's snowmachine for errands and the lunch I have promised Hannah. As the icy, 40 m.p.h. wind numbs my cheeks and ears, I wonder when, if ever, she slows down.

Life Outside the Classroom: Confidence, Competence, and Guts

Hannah's house is a narrow, brown-shingled, two-story frame building on a high river bank. Small couch, kitchen table, three chairs, dry sink and cupboard, wood stove, and ladder to the bed in the loft occupy the ground floor. My first impression is of orderliness with little room to spare. As I enter, I pass through the standard arctic entry way cluttered by dog paraphernalia — harnesses, lines, sled parts, dog food, and so on. Yet everything is as neatly arranged as a quartermaster's supply room. Hannah doesn't have time for disarray in her life at school or at home.

Quickly we are in and out of the house and on our way to lunch at the Roadhouse. Although small, her house is in a "prime" location and very nice for a single-teacher dwelling in rural Alaska. I ask how she got it.

"I was lucky," Hannah responds. "Sven and I became friends in Sheldon. Later, after we both had moved to Chena, the town constructed housing for senior citizens. Sven decided to move to one of the newly finished little houses and offered me his old house by the river. It even has a grass yard just like home in Pennsylvania!"

Hannah first met Sven Sandquist in Claypool, a tiny upriver settlement whose population swells to fifteen during mining season in the summer. When she lived in Sheldon, she often mushed her dogs the thirteen miles to visit Sven and other friends in Claypool. Sven came to Alaska from Sweden in 1937 to mine gold and has done just that all over the state for nearly half a century. During his later years he has acquired some land in Claypool and spends his winters trapping. I visited Sven to learn more about Hannah.

Bright eyes greet me as I step in out of the morning chill. Sven's front room reminds me of my grandmother's — tables cluttered with pastel colored knick-knacks, nondescript linoleum floors covered with throw rugs, a well-worn sofa and matching chair, an early model Lazy Boy reclining chair covered with a blanket (obviously Sven's spot) and a confusion of stacked newspapers and magazines. Grabbing an arm-load of split wood for the stove, he motions me toward a semi-padded vinyl chair in the kitchen. Quickly, he stokes his stove and joins me at the kitchen table. Sven's agility and energy impress me. A smooth face and nimble coordination belie the age of this spry octogenarian.

Hannah had introduced us the previous evening and Sven is waiting for me.

"I'm trying to get a handle on why everyone thinks Hannah is such a good teacher," I begin. Sven sips his Sanka and nods.

"I don't know anything about her being a good teacher, but I bet she's tough on those kids — I bet they learn. She takes care of herself — she's a strong woman," he says with an emphatic shake of his head. "She's got the best damn dog team around here, by God." He purses his lips to underscore his point.

Hannah obviously has Sven's respect, no easy achievement for anyone, let alone a single woman. Sven recounts in his heavy Swedish accent stories of running dogs with her, and even doing a little mining together. As I sit riveted to my vinyl seat, he continues with stories of early strikes on the Copper River, winter draglines near Sleetmute, and the boom towns of Denali and Flat, replete with accounts of prostitutes and gunfights. Sven has only been out of Alaska twice since he arrived, each time to visit family in Sweden. Now he is settled in Chena, still chopping his own wood and grumbling about his "early" retirement from mining caused by a body that is finally saying no to the unrelenting labors of mining. I could have spent the winter with Sven, listening to his stories and learning.

Hannah has earned her place in this tough old miner's heart. In a remarkably similar way she holds the respect of her students. The confidence, competence, and gutsy demeanor with which she approaches life have universal appeal.

Creating Support with Village Parents

The following afternoon, I borrowed a teacher's three-wheeler and set out through the clear, cold air to meet the parents of Hannah's students. Most welcome me. A few are initially suspicious.

I ask them what words come to their mind when they think of Hannah? "Enthusiastic . . . creative . . . warm . . . high expectations . . .

good communicator . . . likes kids . . . strict discipline . . . good knowledge of content . . . intelligent . . . caring" — these are the words and phrases I hear in response. Ten of the thirteen parents I spoke with are very satisfied with Hannah's teaching.

"I think Hannah's strongest asset is her ability to break learning into manageable steps and the emphasis she places on kids' accepting responsibility for their own actions and learning," responds one.

I ask her for further explanation.

"Well, it's like she always tries to give them homework that has them explain what they need from the parent. Wilma knows that she has to do certain things at home in preparation for the next day, like bringing ingredients for cooking for an example of something. And she knows the consequences of her breaching that responsibility."

She begins to laugh.

"The reason I am laughing is because Wilma tends to be a space case. Sometimes it's 'Earth to Wilma.' Hannah has been really good in working with us on that. Together we have been able to make Wilma aware of her spaceyness.

"Just yesterday Wilma came home at the end of the day and said, 'Boy, I was really concentrating.' She's really improved in that regard."

I ask other parents about Hannah's communication with them. I hear comments such as: "She calls me every two weeks or so and usually it's to tell me how I can work on something at home with Benny . . ."

"Oh here and there. I might bump into her at the store and we'll chat. She calls fairly often . . . "

"Every week Wilma brings a folder home of all of her written work for the week. We really enjoy seeing her progress . . . "

"Any time I see her — we had a good talk at the Fall Gathering. . . ."

Hannah's Fall Gathering is a three-hour evening affair early in the school year. She uses the occasion to acquaint all of the parents with her classroom, teaching practices, and expectations for the first graders. Earlier at her house, Hannah had described this event to me.

"It's kind of a mini-school-day for the parents. I let them experience what a day's like for their child and to get a feel for what I'm like in the classroom. I know most of the parents in and out of school so this really helps to broaden our relationships."

I heard only one specific criticism of Hannah.

"Writing skills. Sometimes I can't tell my child's A from her O. I really think she should improve that."

Finally, I also asked parents about any specific techniques that stood out in Hannah's teaching. From nine of ten parents, I receive the same response: "Power words."

I remembered a power words' chart in her classroom and ask her about it later.

"I don't know where I picked it up. In Sheldon I had first and second and fifth graders. I just started assembling small batches of words from their reading books. I had clotheslines across the room labelled one, two, three, four with a clothespin. Before they went home they had to say their assigned words. I just didn't have time to practice words any other way. And they loved it. There were no prizes then. It was just if you wanted to get on to the next level you had to know these.

"When I came to Chena I incorporated prizes as a reward. It worked.

"I made a board and I have 600 words that are the most commonly misspelled words in our language. I divided the words into groups and then color coded and numbered the small groups. Next I made a chart for the kids. I feel it's real important for little kids to follow charts, to be able to read charts. I just explained it once. 'Here's a bag of prizes. If you get all these right, if you can say each word within five seconds, with no hesitation, you get a prize and go on to the next list.' And I told them, 'You don't have to learn them. If you want to take them home to practice, you can. If you don't want to practice them, I don't care. They're just here and we'll work on them.'"

"You don't require the kids to do this?" I ask.

"No. But most really go for it. One or two still aren't into it, though."

Back in the classroom, I sit next to the board containing the twenty-five rings of laminated strips of power words. I ask a volunteer to read the words.

"What are these, Margaret?"

"Power words," she chirps, her unruly black hair hanging down over her face.

"Can you tell me how they work?"

"You take one of these and you have to say the word and if you get it right you get a prize."

"What number are you on?"

"Seventeen."

"Does that mean you know all of them up to seventeen?"

"Yup. I know all of them. I even know my seventeen ones." Margaret is not shy.

"Do you want to try?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, show me how you and Hannah would do it."

Margaret squirms as she removes the ring numbered seventeen with a stack of word strips attached. She begins: "Sister . . . once . . . bed . . . find . . . along . . . money . . . dress . . . walk . . . clothes . . . starch . . . anything . . . always . . . around . . . holes . . . fat . . . wash . . . happy . . . off . . . turn . . . hand . . . might . . . ad . . . set . . . dent . . . fall . . . round."

Margaret sits back, a victorious grin on her face.

"Perfect, Margaret! What happens next?"

"I will be on my eighteens."

"When do you get to say them?"

"When it's my turn."

"When's that?"

"After Charles."

"What day's that?"

"Monday — I mean Tuesday."

"Okay, so after you get them all right what happens?"

"I go up to the table and I get a prize."

"Like what?"

"Last time I got a spider ring," Margaret beams.

"Anything else?"

"You get a sticker on the board." She turns and points to the power words progress chart on the wall. "There's me," as she points to a string of smiley-face stickers ending at sixteen. "And Alexander is in first place."

Alexander, a quiet Athabaskan boy with large, dark eyes, leads the league with twenty-one stickers. He quietly rattles off his twenty-twos for me but could get no credit until he reads them for Hannah.

"My turn's after Randy on Monday."

"How is it that you learn them so fast?"

"I say them at home."

"Does your mom help?"

"No," he dead-pans.

"You do it by yourself?"

"Auntie Rose helps me."

I found that all the students like power words, even Donald who only had six stickers.

After the kids leave, I corner Hannah: "Alexander is the one . . . "

"Yep," replies Hannah. "Last year's incident was never mentioned by his mom or anyone. He's doing a really good job this year. The kids just grow up."

"Those power words, you use them strictly as a verbal exercise?"

"Well, no. For the kids who are serious there are tricks. We relate phonics to the words to help in recognition. If they're stuck on one or two, I write it on their hand. That's the imprint method, you know, take that picture, and by the evening when it's washed off it should still be in their minds. It's kind of like teaching them tricks for learning."

"The parents are into it too. I have parents call me and say, 'Please send my child's power words home. He lost them' or 'How did my kid do on the power words?' Some of the parents are into it as much as the kids!"

Creating Reaks and Valleys in Classroom Rhythms

It's May; I ask Hannah about her students' readiness to go on. Has she achieved her goals? "My success and good feeling come from their feeling successful and my knowing they're successful. This has been a positive experience and they're looking forward to next year. I need to feel they've achieved, that they feel good about it, and that they want more. These kids are survivors. I don't have anyone in the group that can't make it in the second grade. Some may not do great but there are so many reasons out here for ups and downs with these guys. I know they all have the skills.

"I suppose this comes from the way I feel about myself. When I know I can do something, it gives me a sense of confidence that no one can take away. I think the kids need that feeling, too. I think I'm always trying to improve, not just in school but in anything I do.

"I always said I was just running dogs for the heck of it, but once I got into it and I started to understand them, I wanted to have a good dog team, one I could be proud of and sure of. And I got to that point. Now I'm selling them. I can be confident in telling someone, 'I'm selling you good dogs' and I don't have any doubts about it. They're not the best. I mean, my lead dogs aren't champions, but I know they're good dogs."

"Sven told me you had one of the best 'damn' teams around here."

"Oh, you know Sven," Hannah grins. "There are Iditarod class teams here. I'm not in that league!"

"What about the times you've been disappointed in your performance?"

"Running is one thing I never feel real good about because I've never stuck with it and done a good job. I've just done a half-assed job of it. So I never stick with it. I've never had the desire to keep up on it. I guess I've never wanted to badly enough to do it real well. Same with skiing. I know I could do real well in both of those, but the desire to do a real good job isn't there."

Apparently completing a marathon, which she has done, does not constitute doing a good job.

"So, are you saying that you've been pretty good at quite a few things but you've never really, never completely — " Hannah interrupts me.

"I'll never be satisfied. If I did become satisfied, I'd quit because it's boring. That's what happened with the Environmental School. I reached my peak. I did the best I could possibly do as far as putting in my all, and after that it wasn't exciting anymore. I know that I like to start programs and start new things, but once it gets to be a routine and there's a pattern set, then I get bored with it. That's what happened in Sheldon. I guess if I want something, I am going to make it work. Even if it doesn't work some way, I'll try another way until it works."

"You don't feel like your 'classroom' works?"

"Yeah, it works."

Typical of Hannah — no elaboration. I had the feeling this woman could win the North American Sled Dog Championship and her reaction would be "Yeah, I won."

"I need to know what is going on," she continues talking about her class. "If I am not in control, I do not know where the class is headed. Hence I don't know what is happening with individual students in the classroom."

I am curious if her sense of urgency led to some frustration.

"I get tired of it. It takes a lot of time and it wears me out. Sometimes I will catch some kids goofing off and get on them when they really do deserve that time as their own. Other times I find myself applying excessive pressure. So, I will slack off for a while and then I will build up again and I will think, oooop, too much and I might slack off again. So, it is kind of up and down. I think managing is as consuming as anything I do."

Although it is the end of the year, I see no evidence in class of Hannah being tired, frustrated or short with the kids. I want to see Hannah in September. I ask her what she finds frustrating.

"Not having enough hours in the day to get everything done in school. In Sheldon I lived school. I'd go there, I'd come home, take care of dogs, run dogs, go back at night and spend the evening because it was only me. Here in Chena, I've got a boyfriend and quite a few other friends. I want the socializing. Yet if I give time to my friends, I don't have all the time to put into school. So I haven't been able to get as much done as in the past. There are also sixteen kids here which is a lot different from the six I had in Sheldon."

I told her that to accomplish what she wanted she would have to work from early morning through the evening.

"Yeah, but there are days when I take a break and it's good for me and it's good for them. Or I'll say, 'Well, this is an easy day.' Fridays are an easy day. We made that a rule. The kids call it Fun Day and that's what it is. I don't plan a lot of academics. It's review with games."

I ask her how she gets along with administrators.

"Basically, I'm left alone in the classroom to do what I want. I've found that everywhere I've been in Alaska. I hate hearing about the politics. I think you're going to find that anywhere, whether you're outside in a big city or in small villages. I don't like being in the limelight. I like being able to go on my own. I don't usually have any big changes or demands I put on a principal. Just to be given the space to do my job."

"You're going to be evaluated tomorrow," I point out. "And tomorrow's Friday — Fun Day?"

"Yeah." Hannah laughs. "But she's going to see an important part of my classroom."

I had spoken at length with Bess, the principal, who agreed with Hannah's attitude. This twice yearly evaluation is nothing to be overly concerned about. Bess had set the time when she would arrive. Hannah just continues doing her job. She regards a principal's observation like a fluoride treatment — an interruption she lives with.

I ask Hannah what she would like to work on in her teaching.

"Organization and management skills — those are what I'm lacking."

I am surprised at this response. I point out the numerous wall charts, learning centers, and resource areas. Some would view this room as a model of classroom organization. Her management skills also seem to be exemplary. How could she improve on these skills? "Well, I know they have had stress and management workshops for the central office administration here. Everyone said they were really good. A few times I've tried what people have recommended. If you have a pile of things to do, don't go sorting through them and pick one out and say, 'Oh, I'll do that one today.' Instead, do whatever is on top. You take it and get it out of the way. When that's done, you just work your way down through the stack. When I heard that, I thought if I had started doing that long ago, I'd be much further ahead today."

I ask Hannah about her moments or high points that fuel her high energy level.

"High points are accomplishments within myself and in the classroom. If I see where things have finally worked and someone comes through — you see a light in their face or it clicks — that's a high point. Or a high point is out running the dogs and having a really good run or winning a race when I didn't expect it. Or a high point is being successful when I'm up in the plane and knowing that I came down with a good landing."

Hannah believes that good teachers can make all the difference for kids. I ask her what particular qualities a teacher needs to be successful in rural Alaska.

"They need to be resourceful in that they don't have everything at hand. They have to create and make things on their own. They have to be able to deal with a lot of darkness. They have to be able to be out of their element and to be alone. I think you need to be pretty easy going. I don't know how you find out all these things on job applications. But it has to be someone that's willing to do things that aren't in a normal curriculum. You can't just do straight book work here. And they have to be willing to learn and accept other people's ways.

"Those little village kids need to get out and be active. A lot of their learning has to happen within the village and include the village people. Teachers just have to be a ball of energy. Someone that's kind of outgoing, too, that's not afraid to deal with people. But that's not to say that there aren't people who are quiet and shy that would just be fantastic out here. It's just that I'd want someone that I knew was going to work hard for sure.

"I think it comes down to really wanting to be out here. You want something new. You want something new that you've never experienced. You want a taste of it. But in that taste you are giving a taste of yourself as well. A teacher can't ever neglect that."

Moving On, Taking Risks, and Growing Up

My time is up. Later today, I will be catching the afternoon flight to Anchorage, then home to Fairbanks. After three years of knowing Hannah and my past two visits during which I watched her teach and interviewed her at length, I feel I am beginning to understand her success as a teacher.

For Hannah, both teaching and learning involve taking risks. She enjoys, most of all, teaching situations that challenge her. As soon as she has figured out how to teach a particular group of students in a particular context, she is ready to move on. Whether mastering a new job, training a dog team or learning to fly, Hannah puts herself in unfamiliar situations where she must call on her prior knowledge, ingenuity, and powers of observation.

With her students, Hannah tries to create challenging situations in which students can, in a controlled situation, take risks in order to learn. This helps explain why she sometimes deliberately upsets classroom routines. Routine, she feels, breeds complacency — the enemy of learning.

Her willingness to take risks is also reflected in the way she shares responsibility with students for what happens in the classroom. She invites her students to consider the various activities they could do and to choose among these. She must be willing to go with her students' decisions, including those that may be of questionable pedagogical value. Only if she is willing to risk an occasional unproductive activity and her students are willing to risk doing what most have never done before — taking responsibility for themselves in school — will they learn to make their own decisions, to rely on their own resources, and to trust their inclination to try the unknown.

I began this portrait with the story of Peter and the near-disaster in Anchorage because the incident typifies Hannah. Few teachers would risk taking rural primary grade students on such an ambitious trip. Fewer still would risk a bicycle trip in the city. Hannah did it because she thought such experience vital to her students' growth, both intellectual and social. For Hannah, this goal is worth all the risks involved.

While many teachers would have been sufficiently frightened by Peter's brush with injury — or death — that they would have thought twice about another such trip, not Hannah. She has made several trips with kids since then. Just as she will always look for new challenges in her own life, Hannah will, I am sure, create occasions for learning that invite students to take risks — and grow.

APPENDIX

A Brief Account of the Effective Rural Teachers Research Project

Identifying Effective Teachers: The Sample

Typically, researchers identify effective teachers by analyzing student achievement tests scores. Such an approach was not possible when we began this study. A centralized data bank containing test scores from all rural schools did not — and as of this writing, does not — exist. The central offices of most rural school districts did not even possess these data. To gather such data, the researcher would have had to visit most of the 326 individual rural schools scattered across the vastness of Alaska — a daunting if not impossible task, given the limits of funding for research and the cost of travel.

To identify effective teachers, we chose, consequently, to use a variation of the "expert panel" for selecting effective teachers, including teachers, administrators, and parents in our definition of "expert." We were also curious about the criteria that both educators and laypeople use in judging who is an effective teacher. Consequently, rather than providing criteria, we asked our experts to tell us what they thought made the teachers they nominated effective.

Our purpose was not to ensure that we would identify the most effective teachers in rural Alaska but rather that we would identify teachers who were widely regarded as effective. "Widely regarded" is particularly difficult to define in rural Alaska where a total population of perhaps 120,000 people is scattered over an area equal to two-thirds the size of the contiguous forty-eight states. This led us to develop flexible — and sometimes admittedly seat-of-the-pants — procedures for identifying effective teachers.

As part of an earlier study — the Decentralized Education in Rural Alaska project funded by NIE — we interviewed school board members, community leaders, parents, teachers, and non-classified school personnel in 28 randomly selected communities throughout Alaska (McBeath et al., 1984; McDiarmid, 1984). During these interviews we asked our informants to identify teachers who were unusually effective and to tell us what made them effective. We also asked these questions of regional school board

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members and district office personal.

Subsequently, we mailed to every teacher, local administrator, and district office administrator in the fourteen rural districts in which we had collected data a short survey asking for nominations of effective teachers and brief justifications for the nominations. As we had visited only a sample of schools in these districts, we wanted both to expand the universe of teachers who could be nominated and create an opportunity to collect more data on those teachers who had already been nominated.

We received nominations from 228 teachers and local administrators, 29 central office administrators, and 40 community members. After ranking nominees by number of nominations, we examined those who had at least three total nominations. We were aware that teachers' reputations rarely extend beyond their own school or community. In rural Alaska, this situation is exacerbated in the forty percent of the schools that have only one or two teachers. As a result, we tried to take into account the size of the schools by paying particular attention to nominations from community members and central office personnel in very small villages.

Teachers who had at least one nomination from two of the three major groups — that is, from teachers, central office administrators, and community members — made the first cut. In addition, we investigated further teachers who had at least three nominations from any one group. To gather additional information on these teachers, we telephoned people from the other two groups who knew the candidates. For example, some teachers had three or more nominations from teachers but none from central office administrators or community members. In such cases, we would call the central office and ask the superintendent or the assistant superintendent about the teacher. If this individual supported the nomination, we would include the teacher in our pool. If the nomination was not supported, we attempted to contact a school board member. If the school board member supported the nomination, the teacher would be included.

By the fall of 1984, we had a group of 21 teachers who had been nominated as effective. To gather more information and to double-check the nomination process, we called the central office of each district to talk with administrators about the teachers' responsibilities, their effectiveness, and their relations with the community.

During our initial visit to the 21 teachers, we collected interview and observational data on their backgrounds, teaching practices, and relations with the community. We used this data in selecting nine teachers for intensive case studies. While we did not intend to generalize our findings from our sample to all rural teachers, we wanted a subsample that represented the diversity of teaching situations in rural Alaska. We selected teachers from each of the following settings: a one- teacher school, a multigrade elementary classroom and a multigrade secondary classroom; and from Athabaskan, Yup'ik Eskimo, Inupiat Eskimo and Aleut communities. At the secondary level, we included teachers of mathematics and English. Finally, we included a male elementary teacher and a female secondary teacher.

Instruments

To collect data, we developed four instruments: a self-administered questionnaire on teaching practices; an interview designed to collect information on the teachers' classroom practices; interviews designed to collect information on teachers' academic and personal background; and a classroom observation schedule. In addition, we used an interview designed to collect detailed narratives of teachers' high and low points on the job. We also videotaped at least one full day in the classroom of each teacher in the subsample of nine. To collect information on our nominees and on comparison teachers from colleagues, students, and parents, we developed short interview schedules.

In the teaching practice interview, we asked about practices that research has shown to be associated with above average student achievement test scores. These included setting learning objectives, getting students ready to learn, selecting textbooks and other materials, organizing the classroom for instruction, managing student behavior, deciding on an instructional approach, dealing with student difficulties, evaluating students and using standardized achievement test scores, adapting instruction to culturally different students, and involving parents in student learning.

The self-administered questionnaire also included items intended to gather information on teaching practices, particularly those shown to be effective in working with Native American students. Other items on the questionnaire were school climate questions from the Brookover, et al. (1979) study of effective schools.

The second major instrument was the Behavioral Event Interview developed by McBer and Company of Boston (1981). After prompting informants for descriptions of high and low points they have experienced on the job, the interviewer asks a series of short probes intended to elicit a detailed reconstruction of the event and the informant's role in it. McBer and Company have used this instrument extensively in their studies of unusually effective professionals in the government, military, business, and education. While we did not follow McBer and Company's prescribed analysis, in creating the portraits we drew extensively — sometimes word-for-word — on our informants' description of critical events in their

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worklife. As our visits to informants' classrooms were relatively few, the events they described increased our sample of behaviors. Interviews with colleagues, friends, administrators, students, and parents allowed us to triangulate, to some degree, informants' accounts of events. In addition, our visits to teachers' classrooms presented an opportunity to look for their inclination to behave in the ways presented in their interviews.

For the second round of data collection, we developed an interview for each of the nine target teachers to find out more about the events they described in their Behavioral Event Interview, their experiences as students in school and university, individuals who influenced their academic and intellectual development, and aspects of their teaching that had struck us as particularly significant during analysis of data from our first visit.

We wrote narratives of classroom instruction for a minimum of five classroom days for each of our target teachers. During the observations, we recorded use of time and space, social organization, task assignment, and teacher and student activity. We also recorded directions, explanations, and teacher-student interactions verbatim. The latter task was made easier by the small class sizes typical in rural Alaska. The largest class we observed during the study contained sixteen students. The videotapes provided additional data we analyzed in greater detail for instances of effective teaching practices.

In our interviews with students, colleagues, and parents, we asked them to tell us what were the characteristics of an effective teacher. We then asked if any of the teachers in the local schools fit their description. If the target teacher was identified, we asked for justification and an example of effective behavior. If the target teacher was not identified, we asked the informant their opinion of the teacher.

Collecting our Data

In the winter and spring of 1983-84, we made our first visits to our effective teachers. During this visit, we interviewed and observed the nominated teachers and, where possible, one comparison teacher. At one-teacher or two-teacher schools where both teachers had been nominated, no comparison teachers were present. In addition, we interviewed current and former students of the nominated teacher, colleagues, local administrators, school board members, and parents.

We revisited our subsample of effective teachers in the winter and spring of 1984-85. For this visit, we had tailored interviews for each teacher to address questions that arose from our analysis of data collected during the first visit. We also interviewed parents, students and others in the community who might help us better understand the teacher. Finally, observed the teacher again and videotaped at least one full day of teaching.

Analyzing the Data

Medley (1987) argues that three criteria are typically used in evaluating teaching: outcomes, the learning behaviors or experiences of students, or the teaching behaviors of the teacher. Our data collection and analysis focused on the second and the third criteria.

We did, however, collect outcome data for the students of our subsample of teachers. While we recognize the limited range of student learning tapped by achievement tests, we felt we should collect the scores for the students of our effective teachers as these scores are the primary criterion for judging the effectiveness of teaching in most research on effective teaching practices. If our work was to have face validity in the eyes of the research community, we needed to collect and analyze test scores. Given the population of students in our study, these scores proved, however, very problematic.

The usual argument against the use of standardized achievement test scores for minority students is that the tests themselves are culturally biased. We are not making that argument here. The difficulties we experienced stemmed, in part, from the small numbers of students in each classroom. With only six or seven students in a class, the absence of one good student can seriously affect aggregate data. The problem is further exacerbated by the high level of mobility in rural Alaska; students move frequently among village, regional center, and urban schools. Teachers rarely end the year with the same students with whom they met on the first day.

Moreover, rural Native students, most of whom do not plan to go to college and for whom success in school may invite suspicion rather than respect from their peers, appear to regard achievement tests quite differently from non-minority students (Kleinfeld, 1986). Particularly at the secondary level, students have become habituated to scoring below average. To allow themselves to care about the tests is to expose themselves, year after year, to disappointment and self-doubt.

For all of these reasons, test data proved unreliable as a way either of confirming our sample of effective teachers or of identifying specific behaviors associated with higher test scores. We were interested, however, in whether or not teachers identified as effective in rural Alaska behaved in their classrooms in ways consistent with findings from research on effective teaching practice.

In analyzing the transcriptions of interviews and classes and the videotaped classes, we attempted to establish a fit between the teachers we observed these effective teaching practices. We soon discovered that in isolating and coding distinct "teaching behaviors" and examining these independently, we lost the context that gave the behavior meaning.

For example, the "time on task" literature makes the rather obvious point that students who spend more time on academic tasks score better on standardized tests than do students who spend less time on academics. We observed a comparison teacher who took this finding very much to heart — so much so that he kept his watch constantly before him, glancing at it frequently. Most of the assignments he gave his students were timed.

The effect on the students in his multigrade lower elementary classroom was unnerving, to say the least. In rural villages, being excessively time-conscious and in a rush is thought to indicate a lack of wisdom and thoughtfulness — qualities highly esteemed. Typically, folks take their time — in going places, in speaking, in acting, and in reaching conclusions and making decisions. Little wonder that, in the third grade reading class we observed, the girl this teacher called on to read from the basal stammered and sputtered as her teacher stared anxiously at the watch he had set on the table beside her. While this teacher's students were almost always "on task," we had questions about what his students thought the "task" was. Beat the clock? On the other side of this issue, one of the teachers nominated as effective sometimes spent as much as five minutes at the beginning of his class taking roll. When we asked him about this, he explained that this was the time when he "visited" with each of his students: "I ask them how they are, what's going on outside of school, acknowledge anything they have done in the village, school, or athletics, ask about assignments they might owe me, get feedback on the book we're reading or the writing assignment they're working on, and just get a reading on what their mood is." While the time allotted this activity does not meet the definition of "academic learning time," this teacher views this as an opportunity for his students — for whom English is a second language — to speak conversational English and to keep him abreast of their worries and accomplishments outside of school.

Students of the teacher who took to heart the effective teaching research findings logged more "time on task" than did the second teacher. But what did Mr. Time-on-Task's harried students learn? Merely recording, at intervals, students' "on-task" behaviors tells us nothing of the nature of the task, of its intellectual rigor, nor of its relationship to what else is being learned and to students' out-of-school knowledge and experience.

During our analysis, we realized that no individual behavior or practice, abstracted from the "seamless" whole that teaching is, accounts for the reputation these teachers enjoy. Rather, what these teachers did with students in the classroom grew out of a complex of beliefs, knowledge, and proclivities. For instance, in the opening sequence in the portrait of Austin, a vocabulary lesson provides him with an occasion to generate a discussion of Curtis's hearing aid. Not only does Curtis talk openly about the aid with his classmates and, in the process, begin to overcome his self-consciousness, the Yup'ik Eskimo students also carry on a conversation among themselves in English, discuss the meaning of a vocabulary word that is also a concept (prosthesis), and gain an appreciation for the effects of a specific handicap.

"Parsing" Austin's actions and considerations into the categories of behavior derived from the effective teaching research — such as overlappingness, analyzing tasks, providing advance organizers, using appropriate pause time, and so forth — proved to have limited value. Whether he exhibited these practices or not — and, if he did, with what frequency — did little to help us understand why he enjoyed the reputation he did with students, colleagues, and community members nor why his students' ability to express themselves in writing as evidenced in examples of their classwork improved so dramatically during the year. We knew, for instance, that he used class time to discuss with his students events in the village or his own behavior. For Austin, this was time on task as he defined the task. What differentiated his actions in the classroom from those of the teacher preoccupied with time was not one skill or set of skills, one behavior nor set of behaviors. Rather, Austin was distinguished by his inclination to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances.

Dispositions

This inclination to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances we have called dispositions (McDiarmid and Ball, 1987). Teachers' dispositions to act or think involve their beliefs and knowledge — about subject matter, learners, learning, teaching, teachers, and context — as well as their skills to carry out the tasks of teaching — figuring out what students know, deciding on what and how to teach the content, and then actually doing it, working with parents, and so on. Dispositions also include personal characteristics and commitments.

Teachers reveal their dispositions through their actions and considerations in the classroom. For instance, observing Austin's use of knowledge and skills in the hearing aid lesson does little to help us understand why he would be inclined to create such an opportunity for learning in the first place. What is it that enables Austin to see Curtis's denial of his hearing problem as an opportunity for his students to learn about handicaps and prostheses, to use English conversationally, and to help Curtis overcome his aversion to a hearing aid? What is it that enables

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Austin to see an impending legislative vote in Congress as an opportunity for students to write letters to their congressman, discuss the legislative process, consider the effects of legislation passed in Washington on a remote Eskimo village, and survey fellow students and analyze their responses on the issue? While in both of these occasions Austin draws on his knowledge — of his students, of governmental processes, of current events, of the writing process — and his skills — of involving students in discussions, organizing group activities, identifying concepts or processes that students may find problematic — these have been informed by his dispositions — to involve students in thinking about decisions made in distant places that will directly affect them, to encourage students to draw relationships among apparently diverse events, to promote the habits of thought and group discussion, to consider his students' overall intellectual and social development rather than just the acquisition of isolated skills. The relationship among knowledge, skills, and dispositions is interactive: Just as dispositions shape what Austin seeks to learn, so what he is able to do and what he knows shape what he is inclined to do.

To identify dispositions requires that over time we view teachers' activities and talk to them about their considerations. "Inclination to act" does not mean that the teacher behaves in a certain manner on every occasion; rather, the phrase means that the teacher is inclined to behave in a certain way if he or she perceives the occasion as appropriate. Austin is inclined to use classroom time to promote intellectual growth; like most good teachers, he bemoans the loss of precious class time to activities that foster neither intellectual nor social development. Unlike our time-obsessed teacher, however, he is not inclined to structure activities exclusively by the clock. On some occasions, he will guide discussions and/or activities back to the original topic; at other times, he allows the discussion and/or activity to develop in unintended directions. His disposition is not to adhere rigidly to the task; his disposition is to promote independent thought, intellectual discussion, and consideration of other points of view.

Our understanding of critical dispositions came about through observations of and conversations with Austin over the period of two years. Because of our long-term association with him, we could place what we saw him doing in his classroom in the context of his overall goals and inclinations.

Dispositions toward the context

Our decision to focus on dispositions rather than on discrete behaviors or practices led us to develop a way of presenting our data that would both reveal the dispositions that we found critical and allow an independent observer to evaluate the sufficiency of the data. We feel the portrait format we have used accomplishes both of these goals. As we could not describe everything we saw or learned about each of our teachers, we had to be selective in the dispositions we chose to present.

We chose to focus our attention on dispositions that appear to enable teachers to teach successfully in the context of small, rural Alaskan schools. While knowledge and consideration of context is critical for teachers in any setting, they seem particularly critical in rural Alaska. Teachers operate in an institution whose expectations, purposes, and norms of behavior are often alien to — if not incompatible with — those in the wider context. While teachers work in the school, they live in the village. Their opportunity to be effective in the setting of the school depends, in part, on their success in dealing with relationships and events outside of school.

The portraits have been written to reveal, through narratives and descriptions, dispositions that seem to enable teachers to be successful in the classroom. We, thus, narrate or describe events that occur both within and outside of school. Our purpose is to portray how these teachers take into account context in their teaching. We are interested not only in what they know about their context and how they learned it; we are also interested in the prior question: What disposed them to pay attention to the context and, more particularly, to pay attention to particular things and not to others? The portraits themselves are our answers to these questions.

Limitations of the Portraits

The portraits are not intended to be definitive answers to the question of what makes teachers effective in small rural schools. While our sampling methods severely limit our ability to generalize our findings, we believe, based on our work as teachers and researchers in small schools in rural Alaska, that the importance of the disposition to find out about the context and to use that information in teaching is critical to successful teaching in rural Alaska. From our data, we feel confident in saying this disposition is necessary but not sufficient for teaching well in rural Alaska.

Because of our focus on context, we paid less attention, in collecting and analyzing data, to other dispositions and knowledge. For instance, we could have focused more sharply on these teachers' dispositions toward and knowledge of subject matter. While we did collect data on how subject matter was treated in their classrooms and on their general dispositions toward academic activities, we do not feel our data allow us to portray our teachers' dispositions toward nor knowledge of specific content.

We also do not propose that these teachers are "effective" in the sense

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that the term is commonly used in the literature: "Teacher effectiveness refers to the ability of a classroom teacher to produce higher than predicted gains on standardized achievement tests" (Fenstermacher and Soltis, 1986, p. 17). We did, however, observe these teachers and their students several times over a period of at least two years. Students in these teachers' classrooms were, on those occasions when we were observing, engaged in academic work that seemed to demand their full attention and energy.

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